

Escape from Communist Hungary (excerpt from *Kaisergemse*)

by Frank Luger, DSPE

**Dr. Frank Luger broke through the Iron Curtain to freedom.
This is his story.**



**Frank Luger, University of Miami, October, 1967.
Photograph by Carlos Alonso.**

(Frank Luger first wrote his incredible story for the University of Miami's newspaper, *The Miami Hurricane*, in 1967, and later published it in book form as *Kaisergemse*, available from Lulu.com. The following is an excerpt from his book.)

By 1966, I knew enough to realize that I had two realistic escape possibilities: either through East Germany to West Germany or through Yugoslavia to Italy. Although Hungary has a common border with Austria, it was so heavily fortified that any escape attempt meant sure suicide. My conversations with my local police captain had convinced me that there was absolutely no point, ever, in trying to break through the Austrian frontier. Even the Yugoslavian border was dangerous, and the danger

increased in proportion to nearing Austria but decreased to a low level near Romania. Therefore, should I decide to escape through Yugoslavia, I had to try crossing the border according to such considerations. But first, the East Germany possibility had to be investigated, about which my captain knew nothing—I had to find out for myself.

An opportunity to do just that arose in the summer of 1966, when I spent three weeks in East Germany doing studies in

medical parasitology and mycology as part of my internship in laboratory medicine, with a friend of my father, a professor of dermatology. Because of my political past, I had no hope of obtaining a passport for Western countries—otherwise, I could have merely taken a trip to any Western country and simply forgotten to return to Hungary. But this being out of the question, even to Yugoslavia, I flew to East Berlin and then spent a few weeks in Quedlinburg, in the Harz Mountains, not far from the West Germany border.

What I experienced in East Germany had left me in a state of dismal discouragement. These people were still living terrorized, demoralized, and under such harsh conditions that I could only liken that to pre-1956 Hungary. It was very saddening to see these once-proud Germans thoroughly beaten into submission and turned into a bunch of distrustful, pathetic, self-detrimental, meek sheep. There was absolutely no possibility of escaping to the West—that was confirmed more than once; and while I was there, people were getting killed every day, trying just that. Now, it didn't take a genius to realize that if the East Germans, who, after all, *lived* there, were miserably failing at

such attempts, then I, knowing nothing about border conditions and not having a single trustworthy contact that could help in this regard, had, of course, not even the slightest chance of success. Therefore, the only possibility remained the Yugoslavia/Italy route. Regretfully, I took a last, longing look at the Brandenburg Gate in East Berlin, beyond which West Berlin was sprawling in ostentatious luxury, and flew back to Budapest. Had I known then that only a year later I was going to stand on the western side of the Brandenburg Gate—and I was even going to contemplate my former place on the eastern side from a mounted observation platform maybe a hundred meters to the west across the Gate and the Wall—I think I would have fainted. At least, I would have been utterly incredulous. It was *so* terribly hopeless and depressing to look at the Gate from the east.

However, although it became quite clear that, if I were going to escape, I would have to do it via Yugoslavia, I had no clue as to exactly when, where, and how. Yet, two months later, I was already on my way, and the whole thing was a lot simpler than I had feared. The hardest thing was breaking the magic circle, i.e., breaking away from my daily routine



**Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, view from west to east, 1967
(photograph by Frank Luger)**

in the absence of a concrete reason to do so. The first step is always the hardest.



Frank's last girlfriend, Maria, 1966

Nevertheless, it happened on October 8, 1966. It was a Saturday, a beautiful, balmy, sunny autumn day. I finished my work in hematology in my father's hospital around noon, then went home. I had no specific plans for that weekend, but I longed to have sex with my out-of-town girlfriend, Maria. She was a tall, slim, and very pretty blonde student at the University of Szeged, studying to be a teacher. And Szeged was only 14 km from Yugoslavia. Also, it was so close to the Romanian frontier that all those feared technical obstacles should have, or at least could have, been minimal. Last but not least, the Tisza River flowed directly across the border, and being the second-largest river in Hungary, it offered certain nature-made advantages.

However, none of these considerations occurred to me while I walked home from the hospital and tried to decide what to do with my weekend. My only thought was the girl, how sincerely she was in love with me and how good it felt to make love to her despite her lack of experience, since I was the first man in her life. But she did not expect me, and she had no telephone, living in a student dormitory for girls. To go to see

her under such circumstances was sheer caprice. There was nothing wrong with that, as far as my adventurousness was concerned, but quite a lot was wrong as far as my parents were concerned. So much more so because I simply was not in the habit of traveling out of town alone, especially without a serious enough reason; and to capriciously jump into a train from one minute to another to travel to the southern extremity of the country was simply unheard of. Yet I hadn't seen the girl for some time by then; I had no other girlfriend at that moment; I didn't feel like going out for pick-up purposes; and she was only a few hours away by train but sure to give me a beautiful time. And the unplanned, spontaneous nature of such a venture was exciting. Therefore, I resolved to go and give her a romantic surprise.

My mother was very apprehensive. After all, there was simply no precedent for such caprice. Although she knew about the girl and thought that she was a nice person, my mother disapproved of extramarital sex and all such licentiousness. Above all, she disapproved of the idea of *me* going off on such tangents just like that. So, she insisted that I call my father on the telephone and see what *he* had to say. She did not specifically request that I obtain my father's permission, but that was the implication, all the same. I duly called him. I don't remember exactly how the conversation went, but he neither agreed nor explicitly disagreed. Somehow the end note was that it was my decision, but that it would be preferable to stay even if he couldn't specify the reason. My father was more tolerant than my mother as far as extramarital sex was concerned, but then he didn't wish to antagonize my mother, either. All this amounted to a grudging "maybe" as his answer. So, after a few more minutes of trying to appease my mother's anxieties, I promised to be back by Sunday night (as I thought I would) and calmly walked out.

Because the door did not immediately close behind me, after a few steps down the stairs I paused on the staircase landing and looked back. My mother was slowly closing the door but steadily looking at me. Her face was drawn, haggard, and grim. There was neither reproach nor anxiety in her eyes anymore—only pain. Twenty agonizing years of pain, torment, and torturous anguish of such heart-rending sincerity that only a mother can feel, suffer, and endure—a mother whose infinite love had always been frustrated; a mother whose patient suffering had always been fruitless; a mother whose howling to Heaven for mercy had never been heard, yet a mother who would never give up, a mother whose love would outwear and outlive everything and everybody, even herself. A mother whose immortal love...

Neither of us said a word, but she must have known, if only by premonition or maternal intuition, that I was leaving home and not coming back—ever... that by closing that door, she was closing a major chapter in our lives, the end of an era. To this day, I don't know why, but as our gazes embraced for the last time as mother and child, the aria of Turiddu from Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* ran through my mind: "Mamma ... Addio!"

Then the door closed, and I ran out of the building as though being spurred by the Devil. While waiting for the bus to take me to the railway station, I wiped an inconvenient teardrop. My emotional reaction somewhat baffled me, because I still had not thought of escaping. Why was I so sensitive about going away for a weekend sexcapade? I was sure to get back into my habitual harness by Monday—or was I?

Such similar thoughts kept pestering me while the train was indifferently speeding south. It was quite crowded, and as I was looking for a place to sit down, I bumped into a girl I knew from school. She was going to visit relatives in some small town

that I had never heard of. Although she was a nice girl, and reasonably intelligent, her boring provincialism irritated me. As I was looking at her curvaceous figure slowly receding against the platform of that obscure town, suddenly it dawned on me that I was wasting my time in Hungary. This girl was just like the majority of the people: backward, plebeian, and, at best, depressingly mediocre. I didn't belong to this country—I knew that for a very long time. My whole essence was suddenly protesting against the predicament of frittering my life away fighting windmills to avoid drowning in trivia and mediocrity.

At first I was thunderstruck at the sheer impudence of the idea itself—*now* or never! Immediately, dozens of objections sprang up; perhaps the most important was the fact that I was not *prepared* to escape at *that* moment on the spur of the moment! Although I had carefully prepared my escape for several years by then, the *fact* remained that I was on that train to make love to my girlfriend! I had very little money with me, just enough for the fare, a hotel room, meals, and maybe a little entertainment if she so desired! And I was dressed quite elegantly in a business suit, white shirt and tie. Was *that* an appropriate outfit for breaking through the *Iron Curtain*?

Yet, in spite of the legitimate and powerful objections, by the time the train had majestically rolled into the arched railway terminus of Szeged, I had resolved to escape from Hungary that very evening—or to die in the attempt. I knew that it was sheer madness, yet some intuition, some sixth-sense "divine" inspiration told me that this was a unique opportunity, this was my long-awaited chance, this was *it* ... now or never!

Strange how relieved, how much better I felt the moment my decision was made. This was the end of years of frustrated waiting, hoping, daydreaming, and procrastinating.



Frank and Maria, 1966
(Photos water-damaged during Frank's escape)

Now it was time for *action*—at last! Immediately, my mind busied itself with pragmatic details, rather than hovering in the deadlock of indecision. A strange thrill seized me. My tension became almost electric. Just like in a life-or-death emergency (which, after all, this situation was), all my energies became mobilized; all my senses became sharper; all my thoughts focused on one thing and one thing only: survival!

I regret to say, from that point on, the girl didn't matter very much anymore. Oh, I still went to see her, and we did spend a pleasant evening together. But my mind was elsewhere... so much that even the girl noticed and began to ask her inevitably feminine questions. I took her for a long, leisurely stroll along the dreamy Tisza River—and I told her. I told her that I was leaving and not coming back, *ever*. Although I neither dramatized nor understated my intentions, she had the womanly sense to take me very seriously. Just as well... otherwise, I think I might have been short-tempered with her, which was not my custom at all. As I found out much later, she thought that I was inventing a fancy excuse to get rid of her, although why on Earth anyone would bother to ditch a girl in such an absurdly roundabout way, she couldn't even begin to

fathom. Only when my mother turned up, frantically searching for me 48 hours later, did this poor girl realize that I was in dead earnest—then the full weight of brutal reality crushed her worse than a sledgehammer. But by then it was just too late. Subsequently, she wrote such achingly, even heartrendingly beautiful letters to me that every time I re-read them, even today, they bring warm tears to my eyes.

As we passionately embraced and kissed for the last time among the colorful birch leaves gently rustled by the soft autumn breeze, I was somewhat surprised to see that she neither cried nor made any gesture to hold me back. No, there was only sadness in her pale-blue eyes, deep melancholic sadness, the almost lethargic sadness of broken dreams and wasted love... the sincere sorrow of a jilted lover, the devastation of cruel disillusionment. Suddenly, for a fleeting moment, my heart sank as though being seized and squeezed by an irresistibly powerful, ice-cold hand. Was that perhaps the chilly breath of Death? Was I staring at my own mourning dove? Was she my silently weeping Cassandra? Was I going to die that very same night with bitterness in my defiant heart shattered by a cynical bullet?

The sudden loud peal of a nearby church bell gave me a startle. It was already 10 p.m. It was time to go. I sighed and resolutely turned away from the still internally weeping girl and started to march straight south along the western bank of the Tisza with energetic steps. This was the start; I was on my way toward freedom... I was confident of *that*.

Immediately, my mind busied itself with pragmatic details. The girl was promptly forgotten. Nothing mattered now, nothing but success. “Aut vincere, aut mori,” as the Romans said—“victory or death.”

However, very soon, my progress became increasingly difficult. The walkway disappeared into thick bushes, and there was not even a trail left. Knowing that the river flowed from north to south, but the frontier ran from east to west, I merely had to follow the river, and I was sure to cross into Yugoslavia sooner or later. But the absence of any trail made my progress so sluggish that I started to worry. It occurred to me that if I had to fight my way through this jungle for the next dozen kilometers, I would be exhausted by the time I got to the border—just when I would need all my energies. Therefore, I had to find a way to proceed faster and more efficiently.

Luckily, I soon found a solution in the form of a small boat, most likely used for fishing purposes. It was padlocked to a huge anchor, and there was a shack nearby, also padlocked. I managed to break into the shack, but instead of a pair of oars, I only found a paddle. Then, with nigh-superhuman effort, I somehow succeeded in dragging and putting that incredibly heavy anchor into the boat. I even fell into the water once in the effort. Then I was on my way.

Ah, that was better—much better. I was quite competent in just about every kind of water sport, and so I maneuvered the boat quite easily, canoe-style. There was moonlight;

therefore, I had to stay in the shadows near the western bank while steadily and noiselessly paddling downstream. I estimated that I would arrive at the border around midnight—perfect timing on a quiet Saturday night, when only a skeleton border-guard contingent could be expected to man the post while yawning with boredom. Everybody else of their unit was probably getting drunk and chasing girls in nearby taverns.

I must admit that I was tense, excited, yet also a bit phlegmatic and nonchalant. It was almost the same detached feeling that one has while watching cinema, no matter how thrilling the film may be. Here, I was the protagonist in the Cinema of Real Life, yet I failed to realize it. Maybe it was just as well; otherwise fear might have paralyzed me and gotten me into serious trouble.

I was still dressed in my business suit, white shirt, and tie, but I had also put on my feather-weight dark-blue nylon raincoat for purposes of better concealment. It could be buttoned tightly around the wrists and the neck and tied securely around the waist with its belt without reducing mobility. So I paddled swiftly and silently and almost invisibly among the shadows, gliding stealthily toward Yugoslavia.

Just as my sense of time was telling me that it must be near midnight—and I was starting to get this almost eerie feeling that I must be getting *close*—there was a sudden flash of light diagonally across from me on the other bank, maybe a hundred meters farther south. Then there came a powerful searchlight and an angrily shouted command through a bullhorn, ordering me to land. I pretended not to understand and continued to paddle with all my might to cover maximum possible distance while I could, while the going was still good, which was not much longer. Two more warnings—which I ignored—then they opened fire with a heavy-caliber machine gun, shooting straight at *me*.



**Original illustration that accompanied Frank's story in *The Miami Hurricane*,
Newspaper of the University of Miami, 1967.**

No sooner did the bullets start to buzz furiously all around me, than I rolled over the side of the boat, plunging deeply into the cold, dark river. I was already hit by three machine-gun bullets without realizing it. One went clean through just above my right ankle, on the inner aspect of my lower leg. The second split the skin just above the knee on the same leg while whizzing by, also on the inner side. The third remained embedded maybe a centimeter deep in the outer aspect of my left leg halfway between the knee and the hip. Swimming mostly under water, I soon reached the western bank and crawled under the covering bushes to the top of the steep embankment. Meanwhile, the boat was shot to pieces not much bigger than fireside logs. I ran parallel with the river in a low crouch on the top of the embankment for a few minutes, until I started to hear dogs barking. As I was sure that the barking came from my side, I slid down the embankment, back into the river, and started to swim south under the cover of the deep shadows. However, soon thereafter, I could see that a patrol boat was coming from the other side. It had two searchlights: one steadily circling around the boat, while the other swept my embankment like a sine wave, up and down, up and down, slowly, inexorably, unnervingly. I had to hide, fast. I got back to

the embankment and crawled maybe halfway up under the bushes until I found an empty machine-gun nest. I crawled into it, concealed myself as best I could, and held my breath.

Incredible as it may seem, this time I was saved by half a sine wave! It swept around and above me; therefore, the traces I had left climbing out of the water were left shrouded in darkness. Had the wave of that searchlight beam swept just half-a-phase the other way, my traces would have been clearly spotted, revealing my hiding place. Then a quick machine-gun burst or mortar-shell and ... instant oblivion.

They were close—*very* close. I could hear them cursing, swearing, and calling me names unfit for print. They figured that I must be hiding somewhere; they were intelligent enough for that. But the trouble was that they couldn't find me. As the angry voices drifted away from me, I cautiously raised my head just enough to see that the patrol boat was a fair-sized gun boat, not unlike the American PT boats or the German E-boats. It was already way farther downstream, still searching the water as well as the riverbank. Soon it went back to the opposite shore, and after some more

searching, it stopped moving, probably docking at its base. All lights were suddenly turned off, and there was silence... deafening, almost deadly silence.

I waited patiently, but nothing happened. After what seemed like eternity, but couldn't have been more than maybe 20 minutes, I carefully and noiselessly slid back into the water and began to drift slowly downstream almost like a solitary log, floating on my back. The rationale was very simple: even if the Hungarians made no further move, I still expected some action from the Yugoslavs. So I just let the water carry me like a floating object, giving no sign of life. This is where my raincoat became very helpful. It kept enough air in the chest region to serve as a floater, otherwise I might have drowned. The water was cold, and I started to get cramps. Luckily, I was a well-experienced swimmer, and I didn't panic. With small, inconspicuous arm-leg-hand movements, I not only managed to stay afloat, but I also succeeded in slowly and diagonally drifting across the width of the river, landing on the eastern bank some 8-10 kilometers farther south from the Hungarian gunboat. By that time, I knew I was in Yugoslavia, and I hadn't seen any trace of Yugoslavian border guards. I made it!

As I climbed out of the water onto the eastern embankment, I felt a strange exhilaration—I made it to Yugoslavia!

However, I knew very well that my difficulties were just beginning. I was plunging headlong into the unknown. From this point on, I was in completely unfamiliar territory, awkwardly groping in the dark. I couldn't afford a single mistake. There was an extradition treaty between Yugoslavia and Hungary; if I was caught, I was sure to be sent straight back to a Hungarian jail for no less than the mandatory 5 years of imprisonment. Therefore, I had to reach the Italian border—about which I knew

nothing—in a devil of a hurry, and make it into Italy.

First, I ripped my undershirt and the bottom of my shirt to pieces and pressure-banded my wounds the best I could. Then I looked for a way to continue my escape. There was a kind of dirt road running parallel with the river. I must have been walking on that road for about an hour, still shivering in my wet clothes, chilled to the bone, when I heard the rumble of a motorcycle behind me. I managed to hide in time, but it stopped nearby, and the solitary motorcyclist relieved himself while staggering on his feet. He was drunk. He was also in a good mood, of which I took advantage by hitching a ride with him. He had attended a wedding earlier that evening in a nearby village called Krstur, and now he was heading home to Novi Kneževac. Since I was heading in the same direction, he took me along, driving as steadily as he could, which was not very. Although he scared the hell out of me several times, we somehow made it; but by now he was thirsty again. Damn his drunken folly all the way.

So, we drove to the tavern of the nearby railway station, which was the only place open at this ungodly hour of maybe a little past 5 a.m. There he offered me some Slivovič. The fiery plum brandy almost made me retch, but it also warmed me. Unfortunately, some early risers or late sleepers, as the case may be, were also there drinking. One look at me told my story, whether I liked it or not.

They suggested that I report to the Ustashi, the local version of gendarmes maintaining law and order in rural Yugoslavia. I agreed, but first I needed to clean up, as my "host" offered.

He drove me to his home, which was a typical peasant house with a shingled roof and whitewashed walls, and told me to get

some rest while his elderly mother was going to rustle up some breakfast. I needed no second bidding; I was very sleepy and tired. I fell promptly asleep in his bed. This was around 6 a.m.

I woke about forty-five minutes later to find an armed policeman, in full uniform, examining my wet documents, which I had spread out on the table so that they could dry. He asked me who I was, and since he was sober, I couldn't tell him just anything. So, I soberly told him that I was a water-sport champion intending to travel to Belgrade, the Yugoslavian capital, in my own boat to visit some friends, fans of the same sport. I told him that my papers were in order, and I was allowed through the border but that later my boat capsized, and there I was, marooned in the splendid village of Novi Kneževac, looking for a kindred comrade to help me. I was implying, of course, that I was a good Communist and, thus, a friend of Yugoslavia. As proof, there was my license for water sports, validated for every boating category, as well as my powerful political-agent I.D. card, thanks to the police captain mentioned earlier. I figured that such a story was impudent enough to confuse him.

In that, I succeeded. The poor man thoughtfully scratched his head, obviously at a loss as to what to do. But he was the Ustasha, the local pillar of the law. So, he assured me that he was a good Communist himself and entirely prepared to help a Hungarian comrade in trouble. He said I should stay there and rest. He would be back by noon and bring me a train ticket to Belgrade, free of charge, of course.

I thanked him profusely, whereupon he left. Unfortunately, he also took all my papers with him for verification purposes. Or, maybe, for the purpose of making sure that I was still there when he came back. Oh, yeah? Well, if so, he was due for a nasty surprise.

Without wasting a further moment, I got out of bed. I caught a glimpse of the man who betrayed me. I privately began to curse him as my Judas, confirming my intense suspicions as far as the treacherousness of some xenophobic Yugoslav was concerned. He was peacefully snoring on the porch. I had my underwear, necktie, socks, shoes, and raincoat. The rest was regrettably hanging in the courtyard for drying purposes. I couldn't get them back without being seen. So, I raided the wardrobe inside the room and took the best-looking pair of trousers, a shirt, and a sweater. I dressed quickly, then opened the window and stepped out onto the street. Luckily, the street was deserted at this early hour of the morning. It was maybe 7 a.m. Since I told the hapless Ustasha that I was heading towards Belgrade, I was sure that any later search would probably look for me in that direction, i.e., south. Therefore, I went due west, parallel with the Hungarian border. To the east lay Romania, and to the north, Hungary. Obviously, my only option was west, whether I liked it or not.

First, I had to swim across the Tisza River again, which I did, this time carrying my clothes in a bundle on my head. Luckily, the Ustasha left me my waterproof bound notebook, containing dozens and dozens of names and addresses, my Western contacts, including friends and colleagues of my father, in every West European country as well as in the United States and Canada. This notebook saved my life.

Also, in the side pocket of that notebook, I had some money stashed away, including a few denominations of currencies, like some US dollars, German marks, Turkish pounds, and Indian rupees. That was not deliberate, just a coincidence. Fortunately, the policeman paid no attention to the notebook, although he took my wallet with him, with all my Hungarian money in it.

So, I had perhaps the equivalent of \$10 or \$15 left in various currencies, plus the invaluable notebook. The rest of my possessions consisted of a wristwatch, a Parker ballpoint pen, a Ronson-like lighter and some coins. That was all... plus the cuff links that my sister had given me earlier as a personal gift. But these were so precious to me that I would not let them out of my sight, ever. I loved my sister. I still do, and I still don't wear any other cuff links.

I spent the entire day of Sunday walking west, over 30 kilometers, until I reached the small-to-medium-sized town of Subotica. This was important for two reasons. One, in one of the hotels, I could change money. Two, I could purchase a long-distance bus ticket. I didn't trust trains this close to the Hungarian border. The bus had no I.D. control, since it was heading straight south into the heart of Yugoslavia. But that was at 6 a.m. the next morning. I had to find a place for the night, which I did in a haystack just outside the town. I swore to myself that I was not going to trust Yugoslavs anymore.

I duly took the bus the next morning without any difficulty. It traveled to Novi Sad, where I sold my wristwatch. From the proceeds, I purchased a map of Yugoslavia. I had to know which way to head in order to reach Italy as quickly as possible, especially now that my papers had been taken away, and there was going to be a nation-wide hue-and-cry for me—at least a police alert—therefore, I had to be very careful. I looked worse than a tramp. The last thing I wanted was to be arrested for vagrancy, or some such stupid reason. So, I wore my raincoat to hide the baggy peasant trousers. I also wore my necktie and tried to appear self-confident, especially near policemen or anybody official-looking. I had my shoes repaired in a small cobbler-shop, as the soles needed some fixing. Finally, from what was left of my money, I purchased another bus ticket to take me further south, to a tiny place called Ruma.

I had no business there except one—it had the tremendously important advantage of lying on the international railway line between Belgrade and Trieste. And Trieste was in Italy.

Therefore, I boarded the first train that stopped at Ruma, heading toward Zagreb and the West. It was a local train, stopping quite frequently. I escaped ticket control with a little ingenuity. Then, on the train, a young Gypsy boy purchased my Ronson-like lighter in exchange for all the money he had on him. I made sure of that by checking his pockets despite his protests in whatever language he was babbling. But a few minutes later, he was back, wildly gesticulating that the lighter didn't work. Of course not, the silly boy had removed the wick (this was the kind of lighter that needed a wick, for it was functioning on liquid fuel rather than on butane gas like the real Ronson—this was a Japanese imitation). While I was trying to put the wick back, the train stopped. I had a quick idea, and I stepped down, with a menacing gesture, out of the train, much to the puzzled and angry consternation of the boy, who did not dare to follow me.

In reality, this amounted to robbery. I didn't care very much. What was important was that I obtained some money, perhaps another \$10, a life-saver, even if obtained by inglorious means. But the train had left, and there were no more that night. So, I slept a few hours in the middle of a small forest. This was near a town called Vinkovci, and early next morning, first a horse-and-buggy peasant, then a local commuter train took me into the town itself. There, I purchased another railway ticket as far as my money would last, which was Slavenskiy Brod, another medium-sized town toward Zagreb. I took the international express this time, and sure enough, by the time the ticket controller turned up, the train was past Slavenskiy Brod. Luckily, he was a nice man, who probably understood. We spoke in German.

He told me to hide in the sleeping car and said, with a wink: “Gute Fahrt nach Westen!” i.e., “Good trip to the West!”

I managed to hide in the sleeping car, on the ledge directly above the door in one of the compartments. Anyone even entering the compartment couldn’t see me, and, huddled up there, I looked more like a piece of forgotten baggage than anything else. Unfortunately, I fell asleep. The constant strain, the total lack of food, and everything else made me rather tired. I was rapidly nearing exhaustion without realizing it.

I awoke a while later to the sound of a cleaning woman humming a local tune while sweeping the floor below me. I had managed to hide in the *wrong* sleeping-car, which was detached in Zagreb, and the rest of the train was in Italy by then. I swore softly. Well, at least I was in Zagreb, which was a big city, the capital of Croatia. Here I must raise more money. How? Well, maybe a sympathetic university student could help.

I managed to sneak out of the train and the railway station without incident. Walking around Zagreb was pleasant, and I soon found the university. The nearby park was full of students, like on the campus of every university in the world. However, I had to be careful, because I was going to sell my Parker ballpoint pen. This amounted to a black-market-type activity, and I could no longer trust Yugoslavs. I needed a foreigner, preferably a naïve one, who could not be an informant. I soon found him in the person of a black student from an African country, recently liberated from imperialist-colonialist exploitation, but not averse to quality merchandise from the decadent West. I sold the Parker to him, without difficulty, for about \$5.

From this money, I boarded the train again, all the way to Lyublyana, which was the last major city before Trieste, heading due west. I

couldn’t risk going any further by train. The next stop was Sežana, the border checkpoint itself, but I was sure that plainclothes policemen would board the train in Lyublyana and start the passport control procedures while the train was in motion. At Sežana, only the uniformed police and customs officers would follow, and by that time, any illicit passenger would be apprehended. I had learned such details from the Hungarian police captain, who assured me that this was the system in every Communist country which had a common border with a Western country and which had some difficulty in keeping its citizens under lock and key. And Yugoslavia was certainly such a country. Most Italian refugee camps were overcrowded with Yugoslavs. Therefore, any form of public transportation was out of the question past Lyublyana. I got off the train in Lyublyana around 10 p.m. on Tuesday, October 11, 1966. I was only 60 kilometers from Italy, and now, like it or not, just *marooned*. There was no way to continue... how? With *what*!?

I remember sitting on a bench and staring into the pleasant little river that flowed across Lyublyana. This was already near the end of my third day of frantic flight through Yugoslavia. I was just about exhausted, both physically and mentally. I had not eaten for over three days, and I was wounded. I was looking unkempt, worse than a tramp, with a four-day stubble on my chin. I had next to nothing left in my pockets except the lighter, which was pretty useless by then, and my sister’s cuff-links, which I was going to keep, no matter what. My strength had finally failed me. I was beaten ... so close to the goal, only 60 lousy kilometers ... but no way to go on. After all this—miserable failure. Jesus on the cross couldn’t have felt more forsaken. What *now*? What to do?

As I saw it, I had three options. Either I admit total defeat, or I kill myself, or I continue. Let’s see... admitting total defeat

meant giving myself up to the police. They would take very good care of me, including a trip straight back to a Hungarian jail with the compliments of Yugoslavia and the snickers of Hungary. Or, I could jump into this romantic little river and drown myself. After all, I had sworn that either I make it to the West or I die. Well, here was an eminent occasion to check out of cruel reality forever. Or, I had to continue, but how? My God, how?

To this day, I don't know why or how, but I got on my feet and started walking, i.e., dragging myself with a limp the best I could. My mind was blank. I had no plan, no purpose, I didn't know what I was doing. I was just wandering aimlessly. Suddenly, my stomach pangs reminded me how hungry I was. So, I went into the dark laneway behind a restaurant, looking for something edible in the garbage. Of course, it was humiliating, but I didn't care anymore.

Instead of garbage, I found a *godsend*, right there in the laneway. It was a small moped, a motor scooter, the kind that needed no ignition key, like a sort of motorized bicycle, if you will. It must have belonged to the cook, because it had a kind of basket, most likely for transporting vegetables and kitchen supplies. And, best of all, the moped was not padlocked!

I promptly stole the scooter, but not being able to start the ignition, I just pushed it ahead of me—away, away, away from the laneway. A few minutes later, I flagged down a couple of teenagers who helped me to get the scooter started, believing me to be the dumbest East German tourist they had ever seen (the scooter had no license plates), who couldn't get his own scooter started. Let them sneer and jeer as much as they fancied—what did I care? I was jubilant!

Then I rode throughout the night, high up in the Karst Mountains, carefully staying away

from the main (patrolled) highways, steadily west, in the pouring rain, hoping and hoping that I had enough gasoline. Kranj, Škofja Loka, Zelezniki, Podbrdo, Tolmin, lots of physical obstacles. The scooter stalled three times, but I managed to start it again, every time. According to my map (which was deliberately inaccurate, I was sure), at Tolmin the road divided; it went north toward Kobarid and south toward a place called Kanal. Therefore, I thought that if I left the scooter at Tolmin and walked due west, I was bound to reach the border soon and, hopefully, cross it.

That's exactly what I tried to do—and failed after a few minutes. I had no more strength. There was no way that I could walk in the pitch dark in the rain without getting lost or worse. I was simply too exhausted. And I had to cross the border before daylight, before being discovered and arrested, or shot dead.

Yet, I was close to the border, a few kilometers at the most. I simply didn't know what to expect. Maybe the Yugoslavs did have the same heavy fortifications with Italy as with Austria, maybe not. I thought I could expect everything from minefields to several barbed-wire fences (maybe electrified), and from watch-towers with infrared sniper scopes to bloodhound patrols. Although I was high up in the mountains, this *was* a border with the West. Could I risk approaching this border on the scooter? What if I'm spotted kilometers in advance, as would inevitably have been the case in Hungary near Austria? But I had little choice. I was so damn exhausted that I nearly fell off the scooter more than once.

Based on the rationale that Kanal was a bit too close to the Gorizia-Nova Gorica checkpoint, I opted to approach the border toward Kobarid. It was less surrounded by civilization. At Kobarid, I left the main road and continued on the secondary road toward the border, which was maybe 8 kilometers

farther away. As I covered the last few kilometers, I was getting feverishly nervous. This was probably around 5 a.m. The rain had stopped, and the first lights of dawn were slowly visible. I had to hurry. At any moment, I expected either a roadblock or an armed patrol, yet I kept riding the noisy scooter—so damn noisy that it could be heard far away, I was sure.

Then, once again, I was getting that eerie feeling that I must be *very* close. I prudently stopped, ditched the scooter out of sight, and took a good look around. The road continued ahead of me and disappeared behind a bend further on. To my right, there was a deep gorge with a wild-romantic mountain-river rumbling in it. To my left was a small mountain, maybe 150-200 meters in height. I had to get off the road, and fast, because daylight was slowly breaking. Luckily, it was going to be a misty, foggy, overcast morning. So, which way to go, left or right? I couldn't trust my Yugoslav-made map, which was telling me to go right; therefore, I turned left and climbed the mountain.

I had to be very careful, since I didn't know what to expect. There could be landmines. I particularly dreaded the kind which was thrown waist-high by means of a spring, activated when stepped upon. This mine was the deadliest of them all, though the prospect of a blown-off foot was not exactly cheerful, either. But mines or no mines, I was in a devil of a hurry. So I scaled the mountain as quickly as my wounds and exhaustion allowed me, which was probably at the pace of a snail, maybe even an arthritic snail at that. I found several machine-gun nests, but they were empty. There were no signs of technical obstacles. I sighed in relief. Of course, there could be patrols with dogs, so I still had to be very, very careful, at least until I found out more or saw more clearly the whole situation.

At the top of the mountain, I found a white pyramidal stone with the letter Y on two of its sides. I took a careful look around. I could see the road through the thinning vegetation. It curved around the mountain, on the top of which I now stood. I saw the place on my right where I had abandoned the scooter; then continuing left, I saw first the Yugoslav, then the Italian border posts a few hundred meters further to the left. I realized immediately what this meant. I was very lucky that I had decided to climb the mountain almost by instinct. Call it “divine” inspiration, if you please, because had I opted for following my deceitful map and gone along the river in its deep gorge, I would have gone *parallel* with the border, certain to be captured shortly. Right now, I stood on the border itself. All I had to do was to slide down on the side of the mountain which was to my far left and, logically, I would have to be in Italy. Of course, there could be more obstacles. I couldn't be sure of anything before I had absolute proof that I made it to the West. Thank God I didn't trust my Yugoslav-made map. It would have been nothing less than a fatal mistake.

I managed to get down—more like slide down—on the left-hand side of the mountain. At the bottom, I found the road again, turned left, and began to walk—“drag myself” would be a more accurate expression—along it, away from the mountain. Within a few minutes, I saw a huge billboard, but I couldn't read it before approaching close enough so that my blurred vision could clear. It was but a roadside advertisement of the Caltex Oil Company, announcing in five languages: “Welcome to Italy!”

I must have collapsed in a near-dead faint. I just lay there, immobile, my eyes fixed on the Caltex welcome, and sobbing, just sobbing incredible tears of joy. I made it! I was in the West! All those years of wretched Stalinist misery, the massacres of 1956, the dreary prison months, all my trials and tribulations,

all my hopes and dreams, frustrations and anxieties... I made it! I broke through the *Iron Curtain*!

It was an indescribable feeling. It was something like having done the impossible, having accomplished a bit of a miracle. Where so many people had miserably failed, so many had been killed or maimed for life, I made it! All right, I came dangerously close to dying myself, but I made it. I succeeded in record time with practically no resources!

Finally, this was indisputable success that I had achieved all by myself! Only by my own luck, willpower, and stubborn ingenuity! God in Heaven, this was incredible but true! I was in the West! At last, I was FREE!

Congratulations... clap, clap, clap.

Free... to do what?

Hmmm...



Map image from *Collier's Encyclopedia*, 1995

NOTE

Kaisergemse and Frank Luger's other books are available at www.lulu.com (type "Frank Luger" into the Search box).