

**GRAVEL FOR DINNER.  
THE STORY OF MARIKA SEGESDY.**

**BY DAVID T. CAVELL.**

INTRODUCTION.

‘Where are we going?’

‘You’ll see.’ David turned and smiled briefly at me.

I watched the wet, drab scenery of east London pass by my window as David drove through the narrow streets. Curiosity nagged at my insides. I hate surprises and in the twenty-five years we had been married he still did not realise this. Normally it wasn’t too much of a problem but this time inexplicably, I felt nervous and worried.

Since early morning he had chased me to get ready, as we were to leave early.

‘It’s a fair way off.’ Was all he would say when I asked him where?

I screwed up my face up in frustration at his refusal to tell and on seeing this all he’d do was laugh.

‘If you don’t tell me I won’t go.’

‘Oh no. You will go because you want to find out what it is.’ He smiled. Blast! He knew me well enough to know that much about me.

So, here we are on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. April 1989, a wet Saturday lunchtime, driving towards a destination only known to my husband. How annoying. He swung the car through a large pair of ornamental gates and along an elegant sweeping driveway, on both sides green lawns. Things are looking up, I thought to myself but why did he insist on bringing wellington boots? A large Mansion came into view, a beautiful fountain spurting forth at the front of the house. As we drew closer I saw a sign across the front of the house. ‘WALTHAM FOREST TOWN HALL’. Strange, must be a very rich borough to have a town hall such as this. I mused.

David drove around the building and into a muddy field. Wellington boots! I am beginning to understand. For there in front of us rose a circus ‘Big Top’ and above the entrance a banner proclaimed, ‘HUNGARIAN STATE CIRCUS’, and in smaller letters underneath, ‘FIRST EVER U.K. TOUR’. Around the field were dotted a collection of caravans, trucks, trailers and ‘loose boxes’ for the animals. Fear, apprehension and sadness welled up inside me as one tidal wave of emotion. I struggled to keep it in check and as a result my legs became jelly and dizziness swept over me. I gripped the door handle and waited for it to subside.

David parked the car, ‘How’s this for a surprise?’ he smiled at me in anticipation.

I could not trust myself to speak, so I nodded and turned my head away so as not to show my true feelings. He got out of the car and opened the boot to take out the wellingtons. I got out and the cold brush of raindrops on my face helped me to regain some control. I joined him at the back of the car.

‘Here put on your boots.’ He handed them to me. I took them as if they were hot pieces of coal. He saw my face; a puzzled look came over his.

‘What’s up? Thought you might like a bit of nostalgia.’

‘You know I don’t like circuses. Why bring me here?’ I snapped at him. As soon as I said it I regretted it. His face crumpled.

‘I know but this is from your country. I thought it would be a bit different.’

What an ungrateful bitch I was. He was only trying to please me. How could he know why I hated circuses. In twenty-five years I had built a new life, the old buried and hopefully forgotten. I had never told David the full story of my early life; it had been too painful. So all he knew about me was I came from a circus background in Hungary, the country of my birth.

David opened a programme and showing it to me, pointed to the centre pages. It proclaimed in large red lettering; 'THE FABULOUS SCHNELLER'S'. A picture of a couple riding a motorbike up a wire and another with the man balancing on a large wheel attached to what looked like a crane. Shocked, I forgot my anger and read the smaller description at the foot of the picture. Choba and Piroska Schneller----- I could not read further, my eyes filled and tears ran down my cheek.

'Isn't that the name of you're old circus?' David asked, concern in his voice. I nodded, took a deep breath and decided to go into the 'Big Top', to meet my cousin for the first time.

I came into this world in June 1940 on the outskirts of Budapest, Hungary, I was born into a small travelling circus and my mother, Julia, apparently was in mid performance when she went into labour.

It may seem strange now, in this highly organised modern world, but she did not know about her pregnancy until the day I arrived. There was no routine to life apart from performances. Food and drink were taken when available and amounts varied according to the time of year, location and time spent in one place. Travelling between small towns and villages, with her circus transported in horse drawn wagons, took up most of the year. All natural functions, including menstruation, were very irregular.

Mother's act that I so suddenly interrupted involved acrobatic and contortionist movements. She had put on a little weight but put that down to a fairly successful Spring, where food had been plentiful. In the middle of a complicated move she suffered a severe stomach cramp, as she thought. In the tradition of all circus artistes, she gallantly tried to carry on, eventually collapsing and being carried out of the 'ring' and laid on some straw in a canvas horse 'loose' box located by the Artiste's entrance. A few minutes later I made my first entrance into this world; much to Mother's surprise.

Julia, my mother, never forgave me for ruining her act that day and our future life together reflected this lack of understanding between us. She was a hard little woman, dark hair, and black eyes that blazed when mad, and that seemed to me most of the time. She owned the circus and ran it with an iron grip. Another problem with our relationship was my red hair. My Father, Louis had dark brown hair and as I have said my Mother's hair was jet black! Where did my red hair come from? Maybe the name of the circus was a clue, 'SCHNELLER'. Somewhere in the distant past there was Germanic ancestry and they did have red and blond Germans, didn't they?

My true memory starts at the age of three, when mother began training me seriously for the act. Up until then I had been too young for my body to withstand the rigours of acrobatics, so apart from being thrown up into the air and getting used to gripping and falling, handstands and somersaults, I knew very little of what was coming. The first lesson my mother gave me I shall never forget. I sat on the ground next to the steps of our trailer. Mother fitted a strap around my left ankle and attached the other end to the steps. Then she attached another strap to my right ankle and held the loose end. I was made to stand, and then she tugged on the strap, forcing my right leg out and to the side. I half fell, half sat down, my right leg stretched out behind and to the side, my left leg fixed to the step stretched out in front of me. I tried twisting my body to lessen the pain in my hips, back and legs, but it just got worse. She shouted at me to stop screaming and to do as she said. I felt dizzy with pain and although it was only a minute or so that she kept me in this position, it seemed much longer. Suddenly she released the straps and marched off muttering about what a useless brat she had spawned. I crawled under the wagon and eventually fell asleep. This became a daily routine until I could perform the 'splits' unaided.

My elder sister, Juliska, unlike me, enjoyed being the centre of attention and excelled in all the elements of the act. Two years older than I, Juliska was an accomplished performer on the 'low wire' at the age of five and took part in the family acrobatic troupe with mother and father, known as the 'Fabulous Uhors'. Uhor being my mother's maiden name. As a consequence of her ability Juliska received most of the attention from our mother and this added fuel to the volatile relationship developing between mother and myself. With her blond hair (German influence again), pretty face and precocious ways, Juliska often got her own way with just about everything.

Apart from training, my mother did not have much time for me and I was left to my own devices a lot of the time. My father, Louis Segesdy, seemed to be the only one to show any love for me at that time. A bear of a man, he was the 'strongman', clown, musician, base of the acrobat act and general circus hand. Mother treated him as an employee more than as a husband. Father did not come from a circus background. His family background had been in railways. He had met my mother in the 1930's and fallen for her exotic charm and mysterious life in the circus. Beguiled, he had run off and joined the circus! I think mother took advantage of him and saw him as an asset to the business.

By the end of 1943 I had become part of the act. My sister pushed me across the 'wire' in a wheelbarrow. And despite my reluctance, I was hoisted onto the shoulders of Juliska to form the pinnacle of the family pyramid. The strongest memory of those years is the cold. With no proper forms of heating, apart from the cooking fires outside the trailers, I was constantly cold. Even when summer came, it took a couple of months before I thawed out, and the summers in Hungary are usually very hot. This way of life probably contributed to a weakness in my lungs, which developed, as I grew older.

1944.

Father disappears. Mother puts the 'top' into storage, sells off the horses and wagons, except one, our home. All the 'artistes' are sent away. Mother puts us in the wagon; there is now an addition to our family, a baby girl named Sari, newly born. We head for the forests in central Hungary.

Mother tells us nothing when we ask why. Just to keep quiet and not to tell anyone who we are, or where we are going. Juliska and I are both puzzled and frightened by this unusual behaviour.

Years later I realised the cause of all this. The Germans had over run Hungary and our government had joined with the Nazi's. We, as travelling circus people were classed as gypsies by the Nazi's and therefore, to be rounded up and thrown into concentration camps along with Jews and anyone who did not fit in with their idea of a perfect human being. My mother, being the tough woman she was, on hearing this decided to 'go on the run'.

My father, Louis, not being of travelling stock, was exempt but drafted into the Hungarian Army. I learned many years later, when living in England, that Louis had been captured by the Russians and forced to work in a coal mine in Russia for about a year or so.

My memories of being a four year old girl are not of dolls and a loving family in a nice house. They are of the cold of winter, the heat of summer. Of travelling through forests cramped up in the back of our wagon. Walking along behind the wagon to rest the horse, our feet black from the dirt, we did not have shoes. Foraging for food, such as berries, herbs and edible plants. Hiding in ditches and bushes every time we heard people approaching. Mother hissing at us to keep quiet and hearing my stomach rumble with hunger. Cautiously entering villages and begging for scraps of meat and bread. Leaving within hours to avoid being caught by the authorities. Wandering across open fields dotted with strange metal things protruding from the ground, where rain had washed away the earth to expose them. Mother shouting at Juliska and I not touch them and keep close to the wagon. Later I learned about land mines the hard way.

Distant explosions, flashes of light on the horizon. Passing through villages littered with burnt out vehicles, dead animals and ruined houses, the furniture hanging out and spread around like the guts of the dead animals. Catching glimpses of men in strange uniforms carrying odd looking sticks that belched flame and smoke from the ends. Mother would, on seeing these men, hurry us away, back into the forest before they got close.

One of my memories of that year happened in the early winter of 1944-45. We had been hiding in a cellar with other women and children, I cannot remember which town, and there was plenty of wine but no water. The women filled up large tubs and urns with the wine and used them to wash out our clothes, including the baby's dirty nappies. A group of soldiers came into the cellar; we all huddled together terrified. After making sure there were no men with us they turned their attention to the tubs of wine, which still had clothes and nappies soaking in them. They must have been Russians, for they drank the wine, tossing the dirty nappies on to the floor. We hid in the dark corners of the cellar, keeping as quiet as possible. Mothers whispering to their children not to move and let the soldiers see them, as terrible things could happen to them. When drunk they seemed to be paying a lot of attention to the fattest ladies they could find. I remember a lot of huffing and puffing and sobbing. I was so frightened I thought my heart would jump out of my chest. Eventually the soldiers left shouting and singing in a strange language I did not understand.

That same winter, we were running across a snow-covered field. Sari strapped to mother's back, Juliska and I holding on to her hands. Soldiers were firing guns, the noise deafened us. Puffing and wheezing, I struggled to keep up and mother dragged and pulled me along, shouting at us to hurry. I heard a bang close by and Sari made a strange sound. I looked up at her, half of her head had gone, blood running down on to mother's back. I screamed at mother to stop, trying to tell her about Sari. She shouted back at me to shut up and keep running. She had not realised what had happened and could not hear me properly.

We dived into a frozen ditch and when Juliska and I tried to tell her, she snapped at us to keep quiet, fearing the soldiers would hear. A few minutes later mother got us up and dragged us into the nearby woods and back to our wagon. Only then, when she took Sari from her back, did she realise the full extent of what we had been trying to

tell her. Sari was dead. With a terrible wailing she laid the little body on a bed in the wagon. She went into the back to get some cloth for a shroud.

A stray cat that had adopted us jumped up on to the bed and started licking the blood on Sari's head. Mother saw this, picked up the cat and with a terrible scream threw it far into the trees. We never saw that cat again. We buried Sari in the woods, in an unmarked grave. That is how I remember 1944, my fourth year of life!

## CHAPTER TWO.

### TRAVELLING.

1946.

Although the war finished in 1945, it had not ended for my family and countless other families in my part of Europe. The Russians, unlike the Germans, looked upon us as Hungarian and therefore allies of the Nazi's. This time was even more dangerous than when the Germans were in control. Many of the occupying Russian troops were from peasant stock, uneducated and very primitive in their attitude and ways and therefore unpredictable, compared to the average German soldier, who, although cruel and arrogant, was usually predictable.

Father returned and mother reformed the circus. One of the people to join us, as I thought, a general 'hand', was a big, dark evil looking man, with cold blue eyes and large rough hands, by the name of Jenó. He became my mother's lover during this time.

Our circus top consisted of a buff coloured, large army type tent. On the 'fly' sheets were hand painted scenes of various acts and some of the animals. The 'ring' had a border made of wood with a planked running board on the upper surface to allow animals and artistes to walk and run along. This changed colour from time to time as it was always being rebuilt and repaired by the circus hands. So colours varied from blue, red, green and yellow, or a mixture of all depending on the state of repairs at the time. The floor of the ring being usually dirt or grass would be covered with canvas sheets sprinkled with sawdust and straw to allow the performers to retain a grip on the uneven surface. Ropes and wires hung down from the roof and to these trapeze and tightrope equipment would be attached. The tent would be supported by one central wooden pole, not unlike a telegraph pole. Several smaller poles would support the perimeter, held up with rope 'guys' and stakes driven into the ground. Battered wooden benches, dark brown or red, scattered around the ring formed the audience seating.

Outside the 'artiste's' entrance a couple of canvas 'loose' boxes were erected to shelter the horses and any other animals, while they waited to 'go on'. The outer area around the 'top' would be where the wagons that we lived in were parked. These were all horse drawn, by the same horses that performed in the ring. The shafts would be let down and steps placed between them to allow access to the front. At the rear another set of steps would allow access via a small door. The wagons were all painted like you see on canal boats. The difference being that they had the name and description of the occupant's act shown all over the outside. Our wagon was painted a type of ochre with 'SCHNELLER CIRCUS' on both sides in yellow, orange and green. Between the wagons and the 'top', the animal wagon would be parked for safety. This had a barred cage and solid roof, attached to the rear was a large wooden box, where mother's python lived.

After the evening performance the women would light a large fire between the wagons. The wood supplied by the men from the nearby woods, or wherever they could find it. Large metal poles joined at one end to form a tripod would be placed over the fire as the flames settled and the embers glowed yellow and red. A chain

with a hook swinging from the tripod would hold a large pot, this is known as a 'Bogracz' and resembled a 'witch's cauldron' as shown in films. This pot was filled with peppers, onions and whatever vegetables were available. Added to this, if we were lucky, meat from a freshly slaughtered goat, or occasionally a pig. The senior artistes ate first, then lesser members of the circus. We children came last, as we did not work as hard, so did not need as much strength as the performers. Being one of the smallest, I usually ended up getting a scraping of vegetables and the odd piece of gristle from the bottom of the pot. I can still hear the loud rumblings of my stomach, groaning for food for most of my short childhood.

The skins of the animals we ate, were stretched on tree branches or stakes to dry. When dry, they were manipulated by hand until supple enough to be used in the making of shoes for wire walking and trapeze work. Or to make drums for the small band. This was done by taking willow branches, which are very flexible, bending them into a circular shape, tying them with twine and stretching the skin across until taught. Finished off with large stitches around the rim. I can still make these drums and when my children were younger I used to show them this ancient skill.

My parents argued constantly during this time and most nights were disturbed with them shouting obscenities at each other. I took to sleeping away from the wagon in the woods, or nearby bushes. Here, by myself, I found a time of peace and tranquillity. Lying on my back watching the stars on clear nights or clouds racing across the sky as storms approached. Even the snow did not stop me from my temporary haven. Cold evaporated as my imagination took over and I imagined the clouds were angels or prancing horses performing just for me. I wondered if these wonderful sights could be seen on the other side of the world. What did the other side of the world look like?

I had grown into a short, skinny, bow legged, scruffy girl, with unruly ginger hair and freckles all over my face. My nose, to me, was large and straight, not the sort of glamorous person to be seen in a circus ring. Probably that's part of the reason my mother did not want to have much to do with me. I was hardly an asset to the act.

Some mornings I would awake to find small animals from the forest scuffling around me, curious as to whom I was. Rabbits, squirrels, hedgehogs, which we occasionally ate when times were hard, and every now and then a deer would be watching me. They never seemed afraid of me and I was never afraid of them. Somehow this transmitted between us and I like to think they became my only friends.

That was the situation until 'Muki', joined our circus. He appeared one day, from where, nobody knows, and attached himself to me. I was about six or seven then. 'Muki' was the name I gave him and he accepted it without argument. He was a small 'Jack Russell' type dog, off white with a brown patch over one eye and a stumpy tail that never stopped wagging, except when Jenó was around. Then he would stiffen and growl with fear and anger. 'Muki' became my constant companion and went everywhere with me, even making friends with my animals in the woods. These were some of my happiest times as a child, but it would not last long.

Circus people are very volatile and the members of our circus were no different. We children lived in an atmosphere of volcanic fear. Every day there were fights and

arguments among our troupe. Sometimes the violence progressed from shouting and spitting to fists, feet and the use of knives. The last, being a speciality of my mother's lover Jenó. Everyone feared him and his vicious temper. To make matters worse he was a skilled user of the knife in the many fights he had.

Sometime in the winter of 1946 and 1947, or possibly 1948, as a small child dates meant nothing to me, Louis, my father, said goodnight to me, as I stood by the door of our wagon. I remember it was snowing. He kissed me and walked off into the snow. He never came back. Jenó moved into our wagon. It was about this time I started sucking the middle and index fingers on my right hand, to comfort and, hopefully send me off to sleep. A precious commodity in short supply then.

Jenó couldn't stand the noise I made and wound dirty rags, socks and other disgusting things around my fingers to try and stop me. I defiantly sucked my fingers through all these concoctions. Eventually he would lose his temper and beat me up, usually finishing off by tying my ankles to my wrists and hanging me from a nearby tree. He would leave me here for hours. As soon as he was out of sight I would shout and curse him to hell and worse until one of the others, hearing my calls, released me. It took a few minutes before I could straighten up and the feeling came back into my back and legs. This went on for the next few years.

Another torture I endured at his hands was for the 'act', he said. He would make me stand with my back to him and taking hold of my arms, he would force them up over my head and down behind me. This forced the top half of my body to bend backwards until my head was between my feet. He made me grip my calves and then, picking me up, place me on a large metal tray. I cannot describe the pain this caused but despite my crying and pleading to let me go, he would ignore me. When I had quietened down he would pick up the tray with me on it and place it on a pole. Spinning the tray he tried to balance the pole and myself above his head, but I always fell off, usually bruising and grazing my body in the process.

Jenó, disgusted with this failure would curse and spit on me before stalking off. I was left to tend to myself, no such thing as pity or love existed in my life anymore. While all this was going on my mother never once intervened, or offered comfort to me. And, believe me, I did try to be good and get her attention but it never worked.

We were camped outside a derelict small town, still showing the ravages of war. Only a small number of people living there in the few houses still standing, the rest having been destroyed or so damaged that they were un-inhabitable. Muki and I strolled along what had been the main street, littered with burnt out army trucks, cars and carts, the horses and mules that had pulled them long gone. A few bones scattered about evidence that not all of them escaped the turmoil of war.

The rebuilding of Hungary after the second war did not happen as quickly as other countries in Europe. The Russians decided to punish Hungary for being an ally of the Nazi's. During 1945 and 1946 the Russians demanded war reparations from my country and this consisted of systematically stripping the country of all factories built by the Germans. These and their contents were shipped back to Russia on hundreds of long trains. Stalin also took our gold and silver reserves, this caused massive inflation

and our currency lost all value, sometimes food prices would increase by up to three times a day!

We became a bankrupt country with no means to rebuild our shattered towns, villages or economy. All the while this robbery was being committed Stalin continually informed the world and us that he was our 'Great Liberator' and as such, would abide by the treaty signed with the Allies and allow free democratic elections. We had the election and a party calling themselves the 'Smallholders' won. Their leader, Ference Nagy headed a coalition government. Being a moderate party the people of Hungary looked to the future with optimism.

Unfortunately Nagy's deputy was a staunch communist recently returned from Russia by the name of Matyas Rakosi. He began undermining Nagy and the Smallholders party on the orders of Stalin and the slide towards communism, dictatorship and Russian rule began.

It was a warm late spring day and, being away from the circus and Jenő, I skipped happily along with Muki barking excitably by my side. Seeing the wrecked buildings, floors exposed and furniture hanging out, I decided to explore for treasure, or at least something to eat, for, as usual, I was hungry.

We had searched several buildings and were about halfway along the street, when I saw this large house, one wall completely missing. It was like a dolls house with the side taken off.

'Come on Muki. This looks better.'

Muki jumped up at me, his stump of a tail whirring with pleasure.

We searched the house, being careful not to fall through the holes in the floors, or tread on loose steps on the stairs. In the middle of the ground floor, under some rubble, I found a battered old bucket filled to the brim with paper money, it must have been thousands. Never having seen more than a few coins before, I stood paralysed, staring at this enormous amount of money. Muki, who, not understanding why I was acting so strangely, jumped up at me, whining and mouthing my arm, breaking my trance.

Excitedly, I picked up the bucket, stuffing the money further down into it to stop the wind blowing it away and anyone else from seeing it.

'Come on Muki. Let's go and buy some food.'

Laughing and singing, Muki yelping happily, we searched for a food shop.

On a corner at the far end of the town I saw a small, battered shop, which appeared to have someone inside. A flickering glow shone through the dirty window. I pushed the twisted old door and to my surprise it scraped open. Gingerly I crept in, Muki at my heel. An elderly man stuck his head over the counter.

'Where did you come from?'

'The circus.'

'Well get off back there.'

'We want to buy something to eat.'

'No food here and I bet you haven't got any money. Your types never do.'

I held out the bucket and his eyes lit up.

'I've got money. So can I have something to eat?'

'Only got these.'

He pulled a box out from under the counter and showed it to me. It contained several long black strips. I recognised them as liquorice laces, having once been given some by an unusually friendly village kid some time before.

'How much are they?'

'Give me that bucket of money, which isn't worth anything since the war and you can have all of them.'

I thought this was a good idea as we couldn't eat the money, so the deal was done and Muki and I left the shopkeeper counting the money with a strange smile on his face.

We shared the liquorice, which tasted wonderful and, with bits dangling out of our mouths, wandered back to the circus. By the time we arrived all the liquorice had gone, we had to eat it, or the others would have stolen it from us. That night Muki and I did not get much sleep. The liquorice did its thing and we both had 'the runs' all night. I cannot stand the taste of liquorice now.

It was around this time a spider dropped onto my face and bit me just below my left eye, causing a small puncture wound. Although it hurt for a little while, I ignored it. A few days of my unhygienic life went by and my face around my left eye swelled up until I could not see out of it.

Mother noticed the swelling and grabbed me to examine my face. Our people did not go to doctors or hospitals, unless death was imminent and not always even then as there usually were no doctors to see when we were travelling between villages and towns.

She told me to lay down under a nearby tree in order to clean it up. Mother pressed down on my chest with one hand, to keep me still and then she brought her other hand into view holding a red hot saddler's needle, which, unbeknown to me she had earlier sterilised in the flames of the cooking fire and stuck it into the swelling. The pain exploded in my head. Screaming and cursing I struggled to free myself from my mother's grip but she was far too strong for me. A small jet of puss squirted from the wound, then stopped. She muttered something about it not being big enough. I briefly wondered if she meant my face, then she produced a large razor and thrust it into the flames of the fire. When the blade became white hot she picked it out of the fire and guided the glowing blade towards my face. As it got closer I could smell and feel the heat pulsing off the blade. I could not move, mother held me in a vice like grip and now I was so scared I couldn't even scream.

The razor sliced into my face just below my eye and horrible dirty yellowy green puss erupted out of my face, splashing over my old dress and over mother's hands. The pain, for a few seconds was pulverising then, as the puss stream subsided, so did the pain until it became a dull, throbbing ache. Mother put the razor back into the fire, splashed some cold water into my face, swore at me for being a bloody nuisance and pushed me away. I ran off and hid under the wagon cursing my mother, not realising at the time, she had probably saved my sight. I carry the scar of that razor to this day; it reminds me that although my mother did not have any love for me, she at least kept me alive in those early years.

During the late forties the circus did not perform as often as it should, due to the poverty of the villagers. The war had ravaged the country and people were busy trying to rebuild their lives and find enough to eat, let alone spend money or barter goods to see us perform. However the few that did come to our infrequent shows, usually paid with sacks of flour, yeast and salt. Occasionally paraffin and candles were given in exchange for ringside seats. These last two items were very important to us, as they were our only source of lighting for the evening performances.

As a result of the reduction in performances I had more time available. Not for myself but to be sent by my mother to forage and beg food from nearby farms and villages. I hated doing this, as quite often I would be told, in no uncertain terms too; 'Clear off! Tell your people to get off my land.' Or 'Bugger off you dirty little wretch. The sooner you all starve to death, the better.' And similar requests, not always using such mild language.

I have had sticks, rocks and dirty water thrown at me and when that happened, I would curse my tormentors and run off into the fields or woods and hide there for the rest of the day. I knew that when I returned to the circus empty handed I would get a beating, so I stayed away for as long as possible, usually until dusk.

Mind you, looking back now, I must have been an unwelcome sight to those people. A skinny, dirty red haired kid, wearing a torn scruffy rag, that had once been a dress, no shoes, stinking of body odour, not having washed properly for days and plenty of abusive back chat when threatened. The only time I was clean would be on show day. Before the performance mother would fill a tin bath with cold water and using ammonia instead of soap, scrub our bodies all over and wash our hair in this evil smelling stuff. It burned our skin and made our eyes sting so much that tears streamed down our faces. Many people on seeing Juliska and I just after one of these baths thought we were crying because we did not want to perform. In my case I did not want to perform but it wasn't so bad that it made us cry, it was that awful ammonia. That's why, when travelling, I revelled in being dirty, no ammonia smell, no burning skin and no stinging eyes.

Although I loved all animals there were one group that terrified me. Especially when I was sent to ask for food at farmhouses. As soon as I entered the farm gate it was a heart-bumping race to the door of the house, before these animals caught me. They are, without doubt, the best burglar alarm in the world; the racket they make can be heard for miles. If caught by them, severe damage can be inflicted, as I know to my cost. What animals am I referring to? GEESE, of course. For most of the year I bore the cuts, abrasions and bruises from their beaks, which they used like a sword fencer with a sword. Only these swords not only stabbed but bit as well.

Not all villagers and farmers were unkind to me. In fact quite a few took me in, washed me, fed me and made a fuss of me. They would ask me where I had come from, and I made up stories such as I was an orphan and had run away from the home. Or my parents had thrown me out and I was alone in the world, looking for somewhere to live. Hoping these kind people would believe me and let me stay with them. It was my greatest desire to be able to live a normal life in a house with two loving parents. To be able to eat every day, go to school, play with other children like

the ones I would see as we trundled by in our wagons. And, best of all, to go to sleep every night in a proper bed in a proper bedroom.

Sadly nobody believed me. The sight of our circus setting up on the edge of town, a major event in a country where distractions were few, led them to the inevitable conclusion that I must belong to the circus folk. At least they treated me like a human being for a short while and would send me off with bread, milk and sometimes a few eggs. I was spared a beating on these occasions, although I still got cursed at for nibbling the bread and swigging some of the milk before getting back.

It must have been the summer of 1947 when, for the first time, I shared a secret with my sister Juli. As usual I had been off with Muki scrounging for food, on the way back to the circus empty handed I found by the side of the track a bottle of drink and a mouldy piece of bread. I looked to see if anyone was around, not seeing anybody, I picked up the bottle and bread and set off to find a quiet place to enjoy my feast.

‘Puni what have you got there?’ I heard my sister Juli call to me. (My nickname was Puni, because I was so small. It means tiny or titch in English.) There she was, running along the track towards me, blond hair bobbing and a big grin on her face. ‘Just my luck’. I said to Muki, who was looking expectantly at the bread. Juli reached me before I could hide my find. ‘Can I share it with you?’ She asked, she was as hungry as I and would eat virtually anything. I was surprised at this rare politeness towards me and without thinking replied; ‘Alright but don’t tell Anyu.’ Anyu is Hungarian for mother. ‘Okay, I promise.’ She smiled disarmingly and I believed her.

We found an old log to sit on and I broke the bread into three pieces, one for Muki, one for Juli and the biggest piece for me, after all I did find it. I took a swig from the bottle, it tasted odd, thick and smooth but not sweet. Still, when you are as hungry as we were and it didn’t choke you, you got on with it and did not worry about luxuries such as flavour and taste. I passed the bottle to Juli who took an enormous gulp. ‘It tastes funny.’ She said with a gasp. ‘Give it to me then, if you don’t like it.’ She gave the bottle back to me and I took another swig. That’s when I realised it was cooking oil. I smiled and smacked my lips. ‘It’s yummy. I think I’ll drink it all.’ I knew that if Juli thought I was enjoying it, she would want it. And I knew what would happen if she finished the bottle. ‘I’ve changed my mind. It is quite nice, I just needed to get used to it.’ She held out her hand to take the bottle, smiling her ‘please’ look at me. Got her! I thought, but said; ‘Alright, I’ve had enough, you can have the rest.’ I passed her the bottle, which she grabbed and greedily gulped down the remainder of the contents.

Juli thought I had been very generous to her and all the way back to the circus we laughed and chatted. It was one of the few times we were friendly to each other. As we reached our wagon Juli went a peculiar shade of green, then white. ‘I feel sick.’ She moaned. ‘That’s because you are not used to being nice to me.’ I told her.

Anyu appeared and Juli ran up to her. Before she could say anything, Juli was sick right in front of her. Anyu's eyes blazed at me;  
'What have you done to her?' She shouted at me.  
'Nothing.' I shouted back, matching her stare with my own. Fortunately Juli could not speak as she continued to be sick and then developed diarrhoea, running off to hide her embarrassment in the bushes but not before a couple of circus hands saw her and shouted obscene comments at her. They stopped immediately as Anyu turned her glare on them.

Muki and I did get the 'trots' for a short time but it was worth it. Later I got the usual beating, for as soon as she could speak, Juli 'dropped me in it'. Juli did not speak to me again for a long time.

One Autumn we were travelling through the Bakonya Hills, west of Pecs on the way to Kaposvar, where we were due to pitch up and perform for a couple of days. Snow and ice had come early, making the tracks slippery and difficult for the horses pulling the wagons to get a grip. Progress was slow and we were well behind schedule. This infuriated mother and Jenó, so I kept well away from them, dawdling along behind the circus. Instead of staying on the track, I wandered through the bushes and fields either side, enjoying the company of Muki and trying to find wild animals.

My legs became tangled in some wire and the more I tried to free myself, the more the wire tightened around my legs. I struggled, half hopping, half limping along, with what seemed a large metal pan dragging along behind me attached to the other end of the wire. It was very heavy and my legs ached. Every time the pan hit a rock it forced me to stop and jerking violently on the wire, I managed to drag it free and set off again.

My shouts for help were heard by, of all people, Jenó. He came towards me, cursing me for causing another delay. I stood still and, although shaking with fear, defiantly stared at him. He came to within about two metres and stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes widened and colour drained from his face. For once in his life he stopped cursing, in fact he said nothing. To my astonishment I realised he was scared!

I shuffled towards him and he screamed at me to stop, his hands outstretched as if to fend me off. The circus had stopped and hearing Jenó scream they all gathered, at a safe distance, to watch. Power at last, I thought and with a giggle I started towards him again. He backed away, shouting at me to stand still. I was enjoying this game, at last I had found a way of keeping this bastard away from me and scaring the 'shit' out of him. I decided to keep this old pan and wire with me forever.

As I got nearer to him, the pan bouncing off the rocks with a 'donging' sound, he screamed at me;

'Stand still you stupid little sod. You'll blow us all to pieces.' The look of sheer terror on his face even worried me, so I stood still.

'Why are you scared of an old frying pan Jenó?' I asked with a half smile on my face, although now, I was feeling a bit worried.

'That is not a pan. Now do as I tell you and we will all be okay.' He said in a quiet voice as he walked slowly towards me. When he got closer I saw he was dripping with sweat, even though it was a freezing cold day. Now I was confused and scared. I did not understand how a pan could blow us up. Maybe Jenó had a fever and was

off his head or something. I decide to take a step forward, to see what he would do. I lifted my foot to step out and Jenó froze, screaming;

‘No, no, don’t. Freeze you little cow!’ His voice went so high I automatically froze, one foot in the air. After a few seconds of him choking, trembling and twitching, he managed to say;

‘Don’t do that again. Stay very still and I will get it off your legs.’

His eyes seemed hypnotised by the pan and as he came towards me I saw they were protruding like golf balls, fixed on it. He bent down slowly and untangled the wire from my legs.

‘Why are you so hot?’ I asked.

‘Shush. Keep still and keep quiet.’ He whispered.

When untangled he picked me up and carried me up to the wagons. Throwing me on the ground he heaved a sigh of relief. Mopping his face with a large coloured handkerchief he said angrily;

‘In future stay on the track and keep up with the wagons. Don’t ever lag behind like that again.’

I said nothing but nodded and looked curiously at him. I didn’t understand what the fuss was about. Other members of the circus came over and patted him on the back, congratulating him. Very strange, they all hated him.

Later as we were walking down the other side of the hill, Juliska joined me and we walked along together.

‘What was all the fuss about?’ I asked her.

‘Because, you idiot that was a land mine you got tangled with.’

‘What’s a land mine?’ I asked.

‘You don’t know what it is?’ She looked at me as if I was a half-wit.

‘No. What is it?’ I shouted at her angry with myself for not knowing.

‘It’s a type of bomb. You pull the wire and BANG. Off it goes.’

‘Why didn’t this one go BANG. If it was one?’ Thinking she was trying to scare me.

‘I don’t know. I heard Jenó say it might have been a ‘dud’. Whatever that is.’

It was later, when a bit older I found out that Jenó had been part of a mine clearance unit during the war. That is probably what sent him mad I concluded.

Summer months were spent working the resorts around Lake Balaton, the biggest lake in Hungary, some called the Hungarian Sea. This still is to this day, the main holiday destination of Hungarians and now, many other nationalities, especially Austrians and Germans. The water contains a high proportion of natural minerals including sulphur and people came to bathe in its healing waters. As a result a large number of health spas have sprung up around its shores, used mainly, by the rich and famous.

Although there were a couple for the ‘workers’. The faint pungent smell of sulphur hangs in the air but after a couple of days you become accustomed to it and do not notice it.

It was a happy time for me, even though we worked flat out. Two shows a day, six days a week, the seventh, packing up and moving to the next resort. Because we were so busy there was not much time to get into mischief and therefore very few beatings. Even so, after morning practice I would slip away with Muki and spend the morning exploring the woods and lakeside. We would return to the circus in time to get changed for the afternoon performance. I spent hours watching the rich people

sailing, water skiing and lazing around in the sun, the ladies wearing the latest fashionable beach wear. To me, it was like looking into another world through a large window. A world I had no chance of ever becoming part of but would dearly love to. Those people were as strange to me as Martians would be to you.

By summer of 1948 or 1949, we were again on the shores of Lake Balaton. Rakosi and the communists were now in control of the country and arrested Cardinal Mindszenty for criticising the regime. Gradually private businesses and farms were being taken over by the state and agriculture began collapsing due to mismanagement. Because of this our main income was from the holiday resorts around the lake. I now realise that most of our audiences were loyal members of the 'Party', or wealthy aristocrats who could bribe officials to leave them alone. The farmers and villagers could no longer afford, or have the time to visit the circus.

My show clothes had improved; I was now eight or nine, and I wore a traditional waistcoat with a short skirt in the national colours of green, white and red. My slippers were made of pigskin or goatskin, the soles very soft so they moulded themselves to the shape of my feet and toes in order that I could grip the wire. I now walked the tightrope with Juliska as well as being passenger in the barrow. All our clothes were made by ourselves, carefully hand stitched over several weeks. After the show they were taken from us and folded into a trunk for safekeeping. Juliska and I changed back into our old rags and knickers with holes in and with bare feet we became scruffy urchins once more. It seemed to me that I was an ever-emerging butterfly and as I spread my wings, nature went into reverse and turned me back into an ugly caterpillar.

In between the afternoon and evening performances I, with Muki would spend them down by the lake catching water snakes. Some of the other kids in the circus and local kids were always teasing me and called me a name I hated, 'Voros Roka', it means ginger fox. Whenever they taunted me with this name I piled into them, kicking, biting, scratching, head butting and hair pulling. Because I was always outnumbered, eventually they got the better of me and I got a hiding. Bruised, cut and bleeding, I'd limp back for the evening show only to get thumped by mother or Jenó for having cuts and bruises, especially on my face. The audience do not want to see a tightrope walker and acrobat with a smashed up face. Fortunately the vegetable dyes and makeup we used covered most of the damage and the audiences were none the wiser, I think. One afternoon I was playing with the snakes as usual when I heard the other kids approaching. Picking up two or three snakes I twisted them into my hair. The children, laughing and joking came through the trees and on seeing me started chanting 'Voros Roka', 'Voros Roka, knowing it would wind me up. I had my back to them so they could not see my face, which now had snakes crawling out of my hair and over my forehead. When they got close, I swung round and screamed at them. They stopped as if hit by lightning. I lunged towards them and the ringleader a tall, dark boy, Kis Bancsi, the knife thrower's son, shouted in panic 'Bloody hell, she's got snakes in her hair.' His mouth dropped open. Another said, 'She must be a witch, or something.'

I took this cue and held out my arms allowing one of the snakes to curl around it like a bracelet.

'Now you know.' I said in a menacing voice.

'If you tell anyone about my secret or tease me again, I'll send my friends here to eat you in the middle of the night.' I threw the snakes at them, but kept hold of their tails. The kids didn't see that as they had all turned and run screaming of into the woods.

I danced around with Muki, pleased that at last I had revenge for all their teasing. Gently I put the snakes back into the lake and thanked them for their help. The rest of that summer was virtually fight free.

I opened the matchbox and tipped the big black beetle onto my hand, quickly closing it to prevent the beetle escaping. The beetle had two horns similar to antlers and was therefore called a 'Stag' beetle. During the summer months thousands of them could be found around the edge of Lake Balaton.

Juliska and I were in our 'show' clothes waiting to 'go on'. Juliska, blonde curls bobbing was busy making eyes at a handsome young man, who had just finished his act as part of a juggling family. The 'Artistes' entrance was a hive of activity with entertainers, circus hands, animals and props all bumping into each other as acts tried to get ready to enter the 'ring' and others tried to get out. Swearing and cursing, banging and crashing all around us while we waited for the wire to be erected and for our introduction. A heavy smell of horses, dogs, kerosene oil used in the lamps, axle grease, sawdust, straw and body sweat swirled and mixed in the air around us. Both of us were oblivious to the confusion and smells for different reasons, Juliska watching the young man and me with my beetle.

Juliska did not hear me creep up behind her, slowly I lifted the beetle until it dangled over her blonde locks. Letting go I smiled as it landed on her hair and, in panic, scrambled onto her face, right between her eyes. She instinctively grabbed the beetle as it skidded down her nose. That's when she realised what it was. Her screams nearly burst my eardrums. Running out of the 'top' with Juli in hot pursuit I ran straight into Anyu.

She grabbed my arm

'Were the hell are you going? You're—

'Anyu, Anyu. Puni threw a beetle in my face.' Juli shouted the interruption.

SLAP! My head spun and the side of my face felt as if it was on fire. I fell over from the force of the blow.

'Get up and get into that ring. I'll deal with you later, you little runt.' Anyu snarled as she picked me up and thrust me towards the 'top'. Juli followed me.

'Na, na, na. Puni's going to get a thrashing.' She chanted at me. I bit my lip. Not if I can help it I thought and resolved to hide in the vineyards after the show.

We entered the ring smiling and curtsying to the audience who clapped and cheered. Apart from the red mark on the side of my face and a grass stain on my knickers, there were no signs of our recent argument. Seeing us smiling and apparently assisting each other with our wire routine, no one would guess we were itching to strangle each other.

Our act had developed to where I walked to the centre of the wire from one side and Juli from the other. As Juli reached me I should turn and walk back while she performed the splits and took centre stage as the star of the act. We ended the act with the wheelbarrow routine, after which Juli would do one more walk to the centre

and bow to the audience, while I stayed at one end, passing the wheelbarrow down to one of the hands and did a little curtsy, before climbing down. I should say the wire was only about twelve feet above the ring, so if we fell off, the worst that could happen would be a broken leg or arm but usually it was just bruises and grazes.

This particular night of the beetle, I walked to the centre and as Juli approached, instead of turning to go back, I sat down in the 'splits' position and poked my tongue out at Juli.

'Get off Puni, you little bastard. You're ruining my act.' She hissed at me. Her act! As if I did not count. I suppose as far as Anyu was concerned Juli was probably right. Still, I was determined to make the future beating worth it so I stayed put. Juli's face changed and a dark rage came over her as she hissed and snarled at me to get off the wire. Then she would turn and smile innocently at the audience, pretending this was all part of the act. Eventually Anyu came and stood below me. 'Get on with the act now! Or I'll come up there and drag you down.' Her black eyes burnt into me and, now scared, I got up and walked to the end support. Amazingly the audience clapped and cheered me. I turned and bowed, getting more applause. For once I was the star!

Juli came over to my end to start the wheelbarrow part of the act and as she squeezed by me to get into position she whispered.

'You wait. I'll get you for this!'

'You've got to catch me first. You spoiled brat!' I replied.

With a look of pure hatred, she stared at me and then turned switching on a dazzling smile for the audience. During the journey across the wire she tried to tip me out of the wheelbarrow but I clung on. We finished the act without speaking to each other and as soon as it was over, I ran off into the vineyards. The balancing act went on without me that night.

The next morning after a thrashing from Anyu, I took on Juli. Although older and much bigger than I, usually I got the better of her and this morning was no exception. Biting, scratching and pulling her hair, she struggled free and ran off with me chasing her shouting insults and swearing at her.

Juli ran around the 'Fakir's' trailer and out of my sight. Suddenly I heard her scream in pain. I came round the trailer and saw Juli's foot sinking onto the bed of nails. Transfixed with horror I watched as a nail went through the bottom of her foot and emerged through the top. I started screaming louder than Juli, this brought the 'Fakir', Anyu and the others rushing to the scene. Juli struggled to free herself but her foot would not budge. I felt sick, although we were always fighting, I still loved Juli as my sister and would never wish her any real harm.

All attempts to free Juli from the bed of nails failed, so they loaded her and the nails onto a horse drawn cart and went off to find the nearest hospital or doctor. On their return, Juli with her foot heavily bandaged and not able to perform for a couple weeks looked very sorry for herself. Anyu grabbed me, fixed me with her blackest stare.

'So it's your fault this happened? You fucking ginger vixen!' She knocked me to the ground and kicked me.

'Not my fault.' I screamed at her. It was no good arguing so I crawled away and spent another night under the stars with Muki.

One morning I was playing near our trailer when Anyu came out wearing her best white silk blouse, black bow tie, black trousers and polished black shoes, her jet black hair tied into a neat bun. She only wore these clothes when going somewhere special. I decided to follow her.

Although small, she could walk quickly and I had to almost run to keep her in sight. I knew that if she saw me I would be sent back to the circus, as I was an embarrassment to her. So I kept a good distance behind her.

Out of the field where we were camped, along the bank of Lake Balaton she hurried. Then she turned off into a lane leading up into the hills and eventually stopped at a pair of large wrought iron gates. Opening these she continued along a wide gravel driveway bordered with shrubs, flowers and trees. I followed, hiding behind the shrubs, in case she looked round. Soon I saw large chateaux surrounded by sweeping lawns and colourful flowerbeds. Sitting at a table on the lawn were several well-dressed men and women sharing a pot of coffee being poured into delicate china cups.

Anyu went up a lady who appeared to be the hostess, dressed beautifully in a light silk dress, curtsied and shook her hand briefly. I was fascinated, as I had never seen Anyu be respectful to anyone before and I had never been this close to members of the Hungarian 'Upper Class'. So entranced was I with the scene before me, I forgot to hide and wandered up to the edge of the lawn, only a few feet from the party.

The elegant woman Anyu had curtsied to saw me and said to Anyu.

'Is that scruffy child with you?'

Anyu spun round and on seeing me her eyes blazed anger, horror and shock. I stared back, nervously but unbowed in my ragged dress, my dirty, shoeless feet shuffling on the gravel path.

'What are you—' Anyu started to shout but remembering where she was, she stopped herself just before swearing at me. Turning to the lady she smiled and said

'I am sorry, this is my daughter Marika. She has followed me here without my knowledge. Normally she dresses better than this. These are her 'play' clothes.'

I was just about to tell the lady that this was my only dress, in the hope that she would give me one of her old ones, when Anyu turned and fixed me with the 'Keep quiet, or else' stare. I coughed instead.

'Bring her closer and introduce her to me.' The lady commanded. Anyu beckoned me over to her. Slowly I walked across the manicured lawn until I was next to Anyu, facing the lady and her friends. My heart thumped so hard I thought it might burst from my chest. Anyu whispered to me

'Listen to me and then do and say the same as I do.' I nodded, feeling very self-conscious.

'Yo naport kegyelmes grofe.' (Good day your gracious countess). Anyu said politely, bowing her head slightly. The countess smiled. Anyu nudged me to follow her example.

'Yo naport fel kegyelmes grofe.' I said nervously. The countess frowned and Anyu pushed me behind her, out of sight of the countess and apologised for my rudeness. I did not understand for a moment, then I realised what I had said. Being overawed in the presence of a real countess I had mistakenly said,

‘Good day you half-witted gracious countess.’

Anyu told me to shut up and continued to talk with the countess. They were making arrangements for us to put on a private show in the grounds of her chateaux to entertain her guests. A date for a week hence was arranged and we left. All the way back Anyu shouted and swore at me for following her and almost losing the booking. As we reached the circus she, as by way of a full stop, smacked me round the ear. A week later we performed for the countess and her friends, but apart from when I was performing, Anyu kept me well out of sight of the countess. Even after the performance, when all the artistes were presented to the countess, I was not allowed to join them.

## CHAPTER THREE.

### ILLNESS.

We were travelling to the eastern side of Hungary, it was early autumn and the brown grass began to regain some of its greenness due to the ever-increasing rain showers marking the end of summer. The countryside at this time of year turned into the inside of a rainbow. The grass turning green, the leaves on the trees changing from green to browns, reds and yellow, in some cases copper. Gold of the wheat in the fields, the earth turning from reddish brown to black mud as it soaked up the rainwater. The atmosphere filled with the damp perfume of autumn, pine, grass, wild garlic, ferns and wood smoke filled my senses. Flocks of longed legged storks floated across the sky like clouds as they made their way south towards warmer climes. Their large saucer like nests atop trees, telegraph poles and chimneys silent and dark, indication of the cold winter to come. If it weren't for the persistent cough I had developed in this particular year, 1949, I think, my appreciation of nature would have taken up all my free time.

I developed sharp pains in my chest and breathing became difficult. Anyu ignored my 'cold', obviously thinking I was putting it on as an excuse not to perform. Eventually she realised I was quite ill and cursing and swearing at me for causing her so many problems, she put me in the small cart and took me into the village near to our encampment.

'Where are we going?' I asked.

'To stay with some people in the village until the hospital can deal with you.'

'I don't want to go to hospital.' She grabbed my hair as I tried to jump out of the cart. 'Istan baszon meg.' (God fuck you). I swore at her. But she held me with that vice like grip of hers and whipped the horse into a trot.

We stopped outside a small cottage at the edge of the village and an elderly couple in traditional dress greeted us, ushering us inside. Sitting on the rug covered floor I watched and listened as Anyu explained her problem, me, to the old people. The cottage had only small windows allowing very little light into the room, so it was difficult to make out the expressions on their faces as they listened to Anyu. Suddenly she glared at me.

'Do as you are told by these people.' Turning she left, not so much as a goodbye.

Scared and thinking she had left me forever, I began to cry. No matter how the couple tried to comfort me, I cried for the rest of that day and into the evening. I think I was mostly upset at the thought of not seeing my dog Muki again but, even though she never showed me love, I also cried for my mother. For the first time in my life I realised how much it hurts to be parted from the ones you love.

The cottage had two rooms, one for cooking and living in and the other for sleeping and storage. Later that evening the old lady led me into the second room to sleep. It, like the first room was quite dark with only a small window. She carried a flickering oil lamp, which sent shadowy shapes dancing around the room. I caught a glimpse of a large wooden box where a bed should have been, because I was so scared I did not

question this unusual piece of furniture. A large, wood burning fire place stretched along one wall, shaped like a honeycomb with a large ledge curved around it so people can sit inside the fireplace to keep warm on the bitterly cold winter's nights. A reddish glow in the grate and warm air coming from it gave the room a cosy feel. This type of fireplace is known as a 'Kemence' and is popular with country people. The lady instructed me to climb onto the ledge of the 'Kemence' and sleep there. Tired from my crying, I did as she said, curling up into a ball, sobbing quietly as the heat of the dying fire warmed my skinny, cough racked body. She left me and taking the lamp with her plunged the room into darkness apart from the lessening glow of the fire.

I drifted off for a short while but then awoke, frightened by the unfamiliar sounds of a house. The creaking and groaning of the walls and ceilings as they contracted in the cold of the night. Branches of trees knocking against the window casting shadows of giants trying to break in. The absence of the wind rustling through the trees and the sounds of the animals. The silence made me shiver, the smell of musty material, thatch, polished wood and stale food, all very strange to one who lived in the open air. I began searching for a way out as a trapped wild animal would.

The window was jammed shut and impossible to open, suppressing my coughing so as not to alert my friendly captors, I slowly felt my way around the room getting my eyes accustomed to the dark. I knocked the side of the box in the middle of the room, dislodging the lid. Curiosity getting the better of me, I pulled the lid to one side and looked in. Fear gripped my heart freezing me to the spot, my hair stood on end and my throat closed up choking the scream pushing up from my lungs. Looking up at me was an old man's face, grey and expressionless, hands folded across his chest. Dropping the lid I stumbled away from the box, tripped and fell in a heap near the door. This released my throat and I gave vent to the choking scream.

The door opened and the couple rushed in, concern showing in the lamp light on their faces.

'What's the matter? Have you hurt yourself?' The old man asked.

All I could do was point at the box. To my horror they both laughed!

'I see. We should have told you before but we completely forgot about him.' The woman chuckled.

'You see my husband is the local undertaker and that is one of his customers.'

I trembled; this did not make me feel any better.

'Now don't worry, he cannot hurt you. Get back by the fire and go to sleep.' So saying they closed the door and I could hear them still chuckling in the other room.

I will never forget that night or the ones that followed, for each night I shared my room with a body of one sort or another and I never did get a full night's sleep. I stayed with the kind old couple for what seemed years but in truth were only a few days until the officials came to collect me.

They arrived in a horse drawn 'buggy', two of them, a man and a woman. I do not remember much else apart from arriving at a large sanatorium in the middle of a pine forest. Here a nun, wearing the large winged headdress of her order, took me, along a cold, flag stone corridor that echoed with every step, into a large ward of bed-ridden old people, or so they seemed to my young eyes. I was tied, face down on a bed and a

large needle was pushed into the base of my spine. It hurt like hell and I fought and cursed the doctors and nurses but to no avail, I was cornered and trapped. They fed me evil tasting medicines and generally tortured me, well that's how I saw it, for about a month.

After the month had passed I felt stronger and decided it was time to escape. The confines of a building, hospital or not, made me yearn for the open countryside with my friends, Muki and all the other wild animals. I missed the smells and sounds of Mother Nature. I was even willing to put up with the demands of Anyu, Jenö and circus life in general, I must have been desperate!

Going to the toilet one morning, I climbed out of the small window, dropped to the ground and fled into the forest, wearing only a thin pair of oversized striped pyjamas. My feet bare as I was not used to wearing any form of footwear apart from my wire walking slippers. Problem was, I had no idea of where I was and soon the nuns captured me, scolding me for being unruly, naughty and silly as I had something called T.B. They deposited me back into bed with a severe warning not to escape again. Over the next few months I made several attempts to escape but the nuns captured me each time. It became something of a game for them but not for me.

Around Spring of the following year Anyu came for me. I was so pleased to see her I did not mind that she did not say hello or ask how I was, just; 'Get into the cart. I've got to take you back with me, God help me!' Happily I swayed and jolted along as the cart trundled and bumped it's way along the track leading to the circus.

Muki ran up to me barking and wagging his tail furiously. I jumped down and rolled around with him, making a tremendous fuss of each other.

'Get into the wagon. You're not to go off on your own anymore and you can't work much. Well that's what the doctors told me.' Anyu spat when she mentioned 'doctors'. I slowly climbed the steps into the wagon. Anyu followed and produced a bottle of medicine. She made me take a swig from the bottle, it tasted foul and I spat it out.

'You little bitch! Drink it. The sooner you're better, the sooner you can start work again.'

She forced another swig down my throat, I swallowed and coughed as it burnt its way down to my stomach. She left me choking and coughing on my bunk alone. I never did drink anymore of that disgusting medicine, avoiding Anyu whenever she appeared with the bottle. Eventually she gave up trying and left me to my own devices. The pain in my chest got less as time went on and finally disappeared but the cough stayed!

After I returned my part in the act was reduced, Juli still performed on the wire and I joined her for a short acrobatic routine. This allowed me to spend more time playing with Muki, chasing each other around the wagons and relaxing in the sunshine. I began to get stronger, my breathing became easier and my cough was no more than a minor irritation. My skin turned dark brown in the sun, freckles joined up and, apart from my red hair, I almost resembled the other kids in the circus, life started to improve.

Anyu performed less strenuous routines, as she was getting older. Her contortionist routine she replaced with a snake act. With a python, she wound it around her body and performed relatively minor acrobatic moves; the audiences were fascinated by the size of the snake, so that alone kept their interest allowing Anyu to take it easy. She also trained a troupe of dogs to jump through hoops, over each other and all the usual tricks associated with this type of act. However, although performing less in the 'ring', she was undoubtedly 'boss' of the circus, organising and bullying the acts in and out of the 'ring'.

Jeno, her lover, took no part in the running of the circus but spent his time drinking, fighting and lazing around. Several times I saw him involved in knife fights with other men in the circus. Usually it was because he had made crude 'passes' at their women. He being skilled in the art of fighting with knives usually won these battles, the opponents being carried off bleeding from many wounds by their family and friends. Amazingly no one ever died of his or her wounds.

As the summer months of 1949 drifted along, I noticed as I returned to the wagon after my performance alone, Jeno would be sprawled on the bed he shared with Anyu wearing only a pair of underpants.

'Rub my feet now'. He would demand, grabbing my arm and thrusting his ugly feet into my face.

'Go to hell!' I would spit at him. That's when he would kick me, either in the stomach or face, whichever was in range. He forced me to rub his feet for hours, grunting like an old pig. If I stopped he would kick me until I started again. My arms ached and cramp hit my muscles in my shoulders and back. I prayed that someone would come in so that I could escape but because the performance was still on, it would be up to two hours before this happened. When we were interrupted I would fly out of the wagon, usually followed by a boot and a stream of curses.

As time went by he made me rub his legs higher and higher, eventually exposing himself and making me rub his 'thing'. I became even more terrified and confused by his demands. When I asked him why he made me do this he replied it was because of the wounds he received in the war and this was the only way of relieving the pain. I didn't believe him but dared not tell him for I knew it would end up with me getting a beating and a good kicking.

All this made me feel sick and angry with myself for allowing it to happen, I was after all a grown up nine year old. He also frightened me, as I knew he was capable of killing me and getting away with it, no one cared about a scruffy little urchin in this world. I tried telling Anyu but she did not believe me and cursed me for trying to make trouble between her and Jeno. As he trapped me more often in the wagon, telling me it was all quite normal, I planned to escape.

In the circus at that time were a married couple, Ironka and Otvos, they were acrobats and trained dogs, geese and rabbits. If I had any problems I went to them, unlike Anyu they listened to me and gave me some encouragement and comfort. They were like an uncle and aunt to me replacing my absent father. I decide to tell them about Jeno.

One late morning I went to their wagon and they invited me in, Otvos Basci was in the back getting ready for the afternoon performance. Ironka asked me what it was that was troubling me, she could see I was upset. I looked down with embarrassment. 'I don't know. I think there is something wrong with me.'

'You tell us and we will see if there's anything wrong with you.' Otvos called from the back. Ironka asked if I was sick?

'No it's to do with Jenó.' I whispered now feeling very frightened.

Ironka frowned and Otvos said,

'Has that bastard been hitting you again?'

'Not so much hitting, he makes me rub his feet and legs.' I told them.

'And what else Puni?'

Ironka asked gently, holding my hand.

'Well, you know.'

Ironka nodded a look of understanding on her face. Otvos Basci came over and put his arm round my shoulders.

'No need to say anymore, we understand. There's nothing wrong with you Puni, so don't worry about that. Just keep away from Jenó as much as you can.'

Ironka squeezed my hand and said.

'If he does it again you are to come straight to us.' This made me feel a little better.

Otvos Basci looking very upset asked.

'Have you told your mother about this?'

'I tried but she won't listen to me.' I started to cry. 'Is it alright for Jenó to do these things to me?' I sobbed loudly.

Both of them shook their heads and Ironka said.

'No it isn't. I'll have word with your mother.'

I left their wagon feeling better but with absolute hatred in my heart for Jenó. I swore to myself that one day I would kill him!

It was a few days later when I heard a number of the circus women shouting and cursing near the wagons. I crept out of our wagon and saw a group of them surrounding Anyu, Ironka among them. They were screaming at her and she was screaming back, her dark eyes flashing anger, waving her hands at the women as if to push them away. I hid behind the nearest wagon and heard one of the women shout, 'You should get rid of that no good son of a mare.'

Anyu glared at her and snarled back,

'It's all lies. Jenó is my man and no little runt is going to make me get rid of him.'

I knew who the runt was, me. I saw Ironka looking sad at Anyu's outburst, and then she said,

'Don't you love your children enough to see what's happening to them?'

Anyu turned on her, her face black with rage,

'How would you know what it's like to have kids round your neck all the time? Getting in the way, telling lies about you. Until you do keep your big mouth shut.'

Ironka burst into tears and ran away. Anyu had just said the worst thing possible to her. She knew Ironka and Otvos could not have children. Life is so unfair I thought. I would have loved to be their daughter. After this outburst by Anyu the women lost heart and drifted away muttering among themselves.

Although there were many arguments between the women and Anyu and fights between Jenó and the men, they took no notice of any of them, so Jenó continued to abuse me when he could. Sometimes he made me bow to him and call him 'his majesty'. I realised he was quite mad and therefore extremely dangerous.

It must have been July of that year because the weather was very hot and everything had dried up. Dust rose up around us as we rolled along, the wagons creaking and groaning as they bounced over the ruts. The horses panting and snorting, hooves clapping out an uneven rhythm reminding me of an old clock with heart trouble. Harness slapping on their flanks, white specks of sweat running down their withers, necks and hindquarters. The bright yellows, greens, reds and orange colours of the wagons covered in a film of brown dust. All of us covered in the same dust so that we resembled a large family from the east. I walked barefoot behind our wagon holding the tether rein of our spare horse, this was attached to the back of the wagon. The horse and I plodding along together enjoying each other's company. The dust got into my eyes and nose causing frequent sneezing. It got into my mouth and irritated my throat bringing back the old coughing fits. Even with these discomforts I was at my happiest, Muki bounding off with the other dogs to chase rabbits and anything else that moved, returning dusty, tail whirring, barking with joy, telling me what he was up to. The main reason for my happiness though was Jenó could not touch me while we were on the move. Too many witnesses prevented that bastard from getting his hands on me.

'Where are we going?' I asked Otvos Basci. He was leading his horse and wagon behind ours and I noticed that since I told them about Jenó they stayed as close to me as possible.

'Kovegy.' He replied. 'You will like it there Puni. The villagers wear traditional dress all the time. And best of all, they like the circus.' He smiled down at me and I gave a rare smile back. I liked Otvos Basci a lot but this did not stop me looking for my Apu (father) at every place we stopped. Maybe he would be here, I wondered if he would recognise me, I knew I'd know him.

Early evening we pulled off the track into a field just outside Kovegy, which is situated in the south east of Hungary, near the border with Romania. The nearest large town is Mako, some one hundred kilometres to the west. The wagons formed up in a loose circle leaving a large space in the middle for the erection of the 'top' in the morning. The men unharnessed the horses and led them to one corner where the stables would be erected. Here they watered and fed them, being so warm they could spend the night in the open. To prevent them wandering off the front legs were hobbled so they could only shuffle along. In our society the horses always came first as they worked the hardest and were not only our transport, but earned us part of our income by performing in the 'ring'.

The women sorted out the wagons and sent the children to collect firewood for the cooking fire. I hid behind the wagons keeping out of sight, I did not want Anyu or Jenó to find me. Juli pranced around showing off to everyone, she really was the star of the show. Appearances can be so deceptive; it was some time later I discovered Juli was not as happy as she made out.

That night I slept out in the open, away from that bastard and as a result Muki and I had a lovely long sleep, being awoken by the sound of the men erecting the 'top' around six the next morning. Stretching and yawning through half-open eyes, why is it that the more sleep you have, the more you want? I watched the men unloading the wagons and laying out the poles, canvas and ropes on the ground in the correct order for lifting.

Anyu came into sight, shouting orders and waving her hands at the men, bullying and threatening the sack for those she assumed were not pulling their weight. I eased myself into the surrounding bushes where she could not see me and, with Muki, settled down allowing the early morning sun to warm our bodies, luxury!

The men sweated and cursed as they worked but did not complain directly to Anyu, jobs were hard to come by at this time. Circuses and fairs were disappearing as the Communists gained a tighter grip on the country. One of the reasons we still operated was due to being small and continuously on the move, making it much harder to find us.

Awake and eager for adventure, Muki and I made our way into the town of Kovegy. As we approached the town I saw a stream running alongside the track, a small wooden bridge led to the town side of the stream. Below the bridge at the water's edge I saw a group of women dressed in traditional full blue or black skirts with layers of petticoats underneath. Above these they wore white linen blouses with brightly coloured waistcoats. Into these were sown sparkling buttons in various patterns depicting which family they belonged to. On their heads they had linen bonnets, white or light colours for single women and darker ones for the married ladies. They were kneeling or crouching on the bank doing the daily washing, clothing soaking in the stream, hanging on bushes to dry and other clothing being vigorously scrubbed by the ladies with stones and smooth rocks. All the time keeping up a continuous laughing chatter among themselves.

It was such a happy scene I stopped on the bridge and gazed in wonder at them, the circus people were never happy like this when they were working. As I watched I noticed other women further away from the stream nursing babies, with toddlers playing around them, giggling, shouting and the occasional cry as one of them fell over or had a favourite toy taken from them. Some mothers were breast feeding their babies, it seemed so relaxed and natural, I wanted to stay.

A couple of the women by the stream noticed me and beckoned me to join them. I left the bridge and slid down the bank to them, Muki barking and jumping down behind me. I stood, now quite shy in their company, not knowing what to say, feeling very odd in my torn, dirty old dress.

'Hello are you with the circus?' One middle aged lady asked.

'Well sort of.' I said hesitantly. I wanted to be one of them, not a poor, ragged circus girl.

'Well, are you, or aren't you?' A younger woman wearing a white bonnet demanded. It was no-good, obviously they knew. In a small place like this they did not get many visitors.

'Yes I am.' I reluctantly admitted.

'How exciting.' The young woman exclaimed. Eyes sparkling she went on. 'What do you do in the circus?'

'Not much. Just some acrobatics.' I clasped my hands in front of me and looked down at the ground in embarrassment. The other women had stopped washing and gathered around me, ushering me up the bank to where the impromptu nursery was situated.

The woman who had spoken to me now told the others, including the children, that I was an acrobat from the circus.

‘Can you do some now?’ A voice from the group asked. A chorus of encouragement followed this from the others.

‘Not really. I have to warm up first.’ I said this in the hope that they would shut up and leave me alone. Although I wanted to be with them, I wanted to be left alone to do the washing like them, not be the centre of attention as a performer.

‘Oh go on. If you do I’ll let you have some of my poppy cake.’ One of the older matrons tempted me. Always hungry, this offer was accepted by my stomach rumbling loudly, I had not eaten yet, nothing unusual in that, but the nearness of a meal got my digestive juices roaring.

To emphasise, she took a napkin from a pocket in her voluminous skirt, unwrapping it she showed me a large piece of mouth watering cake, small grey poppy seeds glittering in the sunshine, scattered over the top of the sweet, bread like cake. My mouth filled with saliva and a little dribbled down my chin. I quickly wiped it away but the lady with the cake noticed and her eyes lit up.

‘Look everyone! The circus girl is going to put on a show.’ She turned and smiled at the other women before turning back to me and indicating a level patch of earth for me to use.

As they crowded round the edge of the flat section of earth, forming a human ‘ring’, I stood in the middle and did my stretching warm-up exercises. They applauded even these simple moves! I realised I could get away with a few basic moves and then the cake would be mine.

Pretending that my torn, dirty orange dress were my ‘show clothes’, I went into my opening routine. A couple of handsprings, back flips, somersaults and finishing with the ‘splits’ which I had so painfully learned at a young age. They all clapped and cheered and the lady gave me the large chunk of poppy cake, which I wolfed down, pausing only to give a piece to Muki, who sat, begging silently at my side. The women went back to work, and, having drunk some stream water to wash down the cake, Muki and I stretched lazily on the bank in the warm sunlight watching these friendly women work.

Basking in the warm sunshine watching the mothers and children playing, I wondered, first, what it must be like to have a mother who played with you and showed love, then I wondered what I would be like if I had children? Maybe I would be like my mother, hard and unforgiving, or I hoped, like these mothers, loving and caring. Many years later I found out what type of mother I would be.

We arrived back at the circus around noon, all the work of erecting the ‘top’ and other ancillary ‘constructions’ such as stables for the horses were complete. Artistes free of the manual labour were rehearsing their acts among the trailers and wagons. Small groups of local people drawn by the ‘glamour’ of our troupe watched, wide mouthed as horses pranced, contortionists stretched and contorted, acrobats flip flopped back and forth, dogs barked and jumped around in a jumble, making no sense of a routine, but Anyu and the others knew the moment they entered the ‘ring’ the dogs would ‘switch on’. Bancsi, the cross eyed knife thrower busied himself checking the balance of his knives and greasing the spindle of the revolving target board upon which his wife would be strapped. His wife was shouting at him again, he trying to ignore her but every now and again when she paused to take breath, he spat a few curses at her.

If this continued Zita the normal sized wife of the circus dwarf, would step into her place. The dwarf, an evil little fellow, carried a walking stick with a hooked top, with this he would hook Zita around the legs, causing her to fall down, then he would jump on her and beat her unmercifully for the slightest thing. These people had been with us for as long as I could remember, so we took no notice of their eccentricities.

Wandering among the chaotic scene, laughing at the frustration of artistes as they got something wrong, or were interrupted by curious villagers, a hand grabbed my shoulder.

‘There you are, you little fucker!’ It was Jenó, I froze with fear. Fighting not to show him how he frightened me, I turned and looked him straight in the eye.

‘Leave me alone you bastard.’ I spat at him. He struck me across my face but stopped me falling with his grip on my shoulder.

‘I’ll teach you to have more respect for me, you little toad.’ I waited for another blow but it did not come.

‘Get down to the town and get me some food and Palinka’ (a strong fruit spirit brandy).

‘Get it yourself you lazy son of a cow.’ I replied.

‘Right you asked for it.’ And so saying dragged me, kicking and screaming, away from the circus, into the next field. Everyone was so busy, they did not notice him or me. In the field stood a number of trees, he dragged me over to the tallest one. Now I was shaking with terror but biting my lip, I refused to beg for mercy.

From his pocket he took several pieces of twine, throwing me down on my face, he bound my hands behind me. Then, with a second piece, he joined it to the one around my hands and ran it down, binding the end around my ankles. Pulling this tight, forced me into a kneeling position. With my hands down by my ankles, he tied a third piece of twine to the one around my wrists and threw the loose end over a low branch of the tree. Hoisting on the loose end, I was lifted off the ground by my wrists, still attached to my ankles. He tied the loose end to the tree, leaving me swinging some four feet from the ground. The pain in my wrists, arms, shoulders and back seared through me and, despite trying not to, I screamed in agony.

‘That’ll teach you, you little bitch. I am the boss! Remember that.’ Smiling wickedly he spun me round like a top and walked off whistling.

He had done this to me before and I knew what to expect. Gradually the world stopped spinning and gently swung from side to side. I flexed my hands and feet trying to loosen the bindings but to no avail. Slowly the pain left and was replaced with a dull, throbbing ache. Then this faded as my body became numb, apart from a splitting headache and sharp pains in my neck.

The world became misty, as it does on damp, early morning before the sun reaches it’s full power. I shook my head but the mist remained and the day grew darker. I felt light-headed and slightly sick. I desperately wanted to close my eyes and sleep, shutting out this agony. My eyes closed but like a bolt of lightning, my mind shouted stay awake! I shook my head, forcing my eyes open, everything was blurred and spinning.

‘Now is the time to leave this world.’ I told myself, pushing my other thoughts away. ‘Just close my eyes and drift away. No more pain, no more disappointments.’ Slowly the world drifted away from me and I felt relaxed and very tired.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, I jerked awake. Something deep inside me surfaced.

'No!' Kept repeating in my head, 'Don't give in to that bastard. Don't let him win!' I managed a weak cry for help. After what seemed like hours, but was probably only about thirty minutes to an hour, I heard a man's voice talking to me. Strong hands held me as the rope was removed from my battered body. Gently I was laid on the ground, still curled into a ball, my joints locked up. The man massaged my body, releasing me from my cramped prison.

'Puni are you alright?' The man's concerned voice echoed down to me. 'Can you hear me?' he asked.

'No, don't touch me.' I said, at first thinking it was Jenó.

'It's all right. It's me, Ferenc.' I looked up into the worried face of Ferenc, one of the jugglers.

'Who did this to you? Was it Jenó?' Ferenc asked as he massaged my aching limbs. Rapidly my senses returned and I shook my head.

'No, it's all right. Thanks for helping me.' I got up and ran back to the circus. I knew that if I told Ferenc the truth there would be another fight and not only would he get hurt or killed, but I would be in for a far worse beating from Jenó. I found Muki, kissed him goodbye and headed off into the town. Never again was I coming back, I thought to myself.

I spent the rest of that day and evening wandering around the small town, scavenging scraps from outside shops and houses. Whenever I saw someone coming towards me I turned and walked away, I was terrified of being picked up and taken back to Jenó.

Nine years old and my life on the 'streets' had begun. It did not last long, that first attempt. After spending the night sleeping under a hedge on the edge of town and feeling more confident, I went along the main street looking for food. Unfortunately I met the local 'rendor' (policeman), recognising me as being from the circus, he took my arm and escorted me back, ignoring my protestations of being from another village.

Anyu beat me for missing two performances and life went on as before. Ferenc told her why I had run away but she chose to ignore him. As a result I became more and more withdrawn from my family and other members of the circus.