
Opening Extract from...

The Invisible Bridge

Written by Julie Orringer

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THE INVISIBLE BRIDGE

'To bring an entire world to vivid life between the covers of a novel is an accomplishment; to invest that world, and everyone who inhabits it, with a soul as Julie Orringer does, takes something more like genius'
MICHAEL CHABON

JULIE ORRINGER

CHAPTER ONE

A Letter

Later he would tell her that their story began at the Royal Hungarian Opera House, the night before he left for Paris on the Western Europe Express. The year was 1937; the month was September, the evening unseasonably cold. His brother had insisted on taking him to the opera as a parting gift. The show was *Tosca* and their seats were at the top of the house. Not for them the three marble-arched doorways, the façade with its Corinthian columns and heroic entablature. Theirs was a humble side entrance with a red-faced ticket taker, a floor of scuffed wood, walls plastered with crumbling opera posters. Girls in knee-length dresses climbed the stairs arm in arm with young men in threadbare suits; pensioners argued with their white-haired wives as they shuffled up the five narrow flights. At the top, a joyful din: a refreshment salon lined with mirrors and wooden benches, the air hazy with cigarette smoke. A doorway at its far end opened onto the concert hall itself, the great electric-lit cavern of it, with its ceiling fresco of Greek immortals and its gold-scrolled tiers. Andras had never expected to see an opera here, nor would he have if Tibor hadn't bought the tickets. But it was Tibor's opinion that residence in Budapest must include at least one evening of Puccini at the Operaház. Now Tibor leaned over the rail to point out Admiral Horthy's box, empty that night except for an ancient general in a hussar's jacket. Far below, tuxedoed ushers led men and women to their seats, the men in evening dress, the women's hair glittering with jewels.

"If only Mátyás could see this," Andras said.

"He'll see it, Andráska. He'll come to Budapest when he's got his baccalaureate, and in a year he'll be sick to death of this place."

Andras had to smile. He and Tibor had both moved to Budapest as soon as they graduated from gimnázium in Debrecen. They had all grown up in Konyár, a tiny village in the eastern flatlands, and to them, too, the capital city had once seemed like the center of the world. Now Tibor had plans to go to medical college in Italy, and Andras, who had lived here for only a year, was leaving for school in Paris. Until the news from the École Spéciale d'Architecture, they had all thought Tibor

would be the first to go. For the past three years he'd been working as a salesclerk in a shoe store on Váci utca, saving money for his tuition and poring over his medical textbooks at night as desperately as if he were trying to save his own life. When Andras had moved in with him a year earlier, Tibor's departure had seemed imminent. He had already passed his exams and submitted his application to the medical school at Modena. He thought it might take six months to get his acceptance and student visa. Instead the medical college had placed him on a waiting list for foreign students, and he'd been told it might be another year or two before he could matriculate.

Tibor hadn't said a word about his own situation since Andras had learned of his scholarship, nor had he shown a trace of envy. Instead he had bought these opera tickets and helped Andras make his plans. Now, as the lights dimmed and the orchestra began to tune, Andras was visited by a private shame: Though he knew he would have been happy for Tibor if their situations had been reversed, he suspected he would have done a poor job of hiding his jealousy.

From a door at the side of the orchestra pit, a tall spindling man with hair like white flames emerged and stepped into a spotlight. The audience shouted its approval as this man made his way to the podium. He had to take three bows and raise his hands in surrender before they went quiet; then he turned to the musicians and lifted his baton. After a moment of quivering stillness, a storm of music rolled out of the brass and strings and entered Andras's chest, filling his ribcage until he could scarcely breathe. The velvet curtain rose to reveal the interior of an Italian cathedral, its minutiae rendered in perfect and intricate detail. Stained-glass windows radiated amber and azure light, and a half-completed fresco of Mary Magdalene showed ghostly against a plaster wall. A man in striped prison garb crept into the church to hide in one of the dark chapels. A painter came in to work on the fresco, followed by a sexton bent upon making the painter tidy up his brushes and dropcloths before the next service. Then came the opera diva Tosca, the model for Mary Magdalene, her carmine skirts swirling around her ankles. Song flew up and hovered in the painted dome of the Operaház: the clarinetlike tenor of the painter Cavaradossi, the round basso of the fugitive Angelotti, the warm apricotty soprano of the fictional diva Tosca, played by the real Hungarian diva Zsuzsa Toronyi. The sound was so solid, so tangible, it seemed to Andras he could reach over the edge of the balcony and grab handfuls of it. The building itself had become an instrument, he thought:

The architecture expanded the sound and completed it, amplified and contained it.

"I won't forget this," he whispered to his brother.

"You'd better not," Tibor whispered back. "I expect you to take me to the opera when I visit you in Paris."

At the intermission they drank small cups of black coffee in the refreshment salon and argued over what they'd seen. Was the painter's refusal to betray his friend an act of selfless loyalty or self-glorifying bravado? Was his endurance of the torture that followed meant to be read as a sublimation of his sexual love for Tosca? Would Tosca herself have stabbed Scarpia if her profession hadn't schooled her so thoroughly in the ways of melodrama? There was a bittersweet pleasure in the exchange; as a boy, Andras had spent hours listening to Tibor debate points of philosophy or sport or literature with his friends, and had pined for the day when he might say something Tibor would find witty or incisive. Now that he and Tibor had become equals, or something like equals, Andras was leaving, getting on a train to be carried hundreds of kilometers away.

"What is it?" Tibor said, his hand on Andras's sleeve.

"Too much smoke," Andras said, and coughed, averting his eyes from Tibor's. He was relieved when the lights flickered to signal the end of the intermission.

After the third act, when the innumerable curtain calls were over—the dead Tosca and Cavaradossi miraculously revived, the evil Scarpia smiling sweetly as he accepted an armload of red roses—Andras and Tibor pushed toward the exit and made their way down the crowded stairs. Outside, a faint scattering of stars showed above the wash of city light. Tibor took his arm and led him toward the Andrássy side of the building, where the dress-circle and orchestra-floor patrons were spilling through the three marble arches of the grand entrance.

"I want you to have a look at the main foyer," Tibor said. "We'll tell the usher we left something inside."

Andras followed him through the central doorway and into the chandelier-lit hall, where a marble stairway spread its wings toward a gallery. Men and women in evening dress descended, but Andras saw only architecture: the egg-and-dart molding along the stairway, the cross-barrel vault above, the pink Corinthian columns that supported the gallery. Miklós Ybl, a Hungarian from Székesfehérvár, had won an international competition to design the opera house; Andras's father had

given him a book of Ybl's architectural drawings for his eighth birthday, and he had spent many long afternoons studying this space. As the departing audience flowed around him, he stared up into the vault of the ceiling, so intent upon reconciling this three-dimensional version with the line drawings in his memory that he scarcely noticed when someone paused before him and spoke. He had to blink and force himself to focus upon the person, a large dovelike woman in a sable coat, who appeared to be begging his pardon. He bowed and stepped aside to let her pass.

"No, no," she said. "You're just where I want you. What luck to run into you here! I would never have known how to find you."

He struggled to recall when and where he might have met this woman. A diamond necklace glinted at her throat, and the skirt of a rose silk gown spilled from beneath her pelisse; her dark hair was arranged in a cap of close-set curls. She took his arm and led him out onto the front steps of the opera house.

"It was you at the bank the other day, wasn't it?" she said. "You were the one with the envelope of francs."

Now he knew her: It was Elza Hász, the wife of the bank director. Andras had seen her a few times at the great synagogue on Dohány utca, where he and Tibor went for an occasional Friday night service. The other day at the bank he'd jostled her as she crossed the lobby; she'd dropped the striped hatbox she was carrying, and he'd lost his grip on his paper folder of francs. The folder had opened, discharging the pink-and-green bills, and the money had fluttered around their feet like confetti. He'd dusted off the hatbox and handed it back to her, then watched her disappear though a door marked PRIVATE.

"You look to be my son's age," she said now. "And judging from your currency, I would guess you're off to school in Paris."

"Tomorrow afternoon," he said.

"You must do me a great favor. My son is studying at the Beaux-Arts, and I'd like you to take a package for him. Would it be a terrible inconvenience?"

A moment passed before he could respond. To agree to take a package to someone in Paris would mean that he was truly going, that he intended to leave his brothers and his parents and his country behind and step into the vast unknown of Western Europe.

"Where does your son live?" he asked.

"The Quartier Latin, of course," she said, and laughed. "In a painter's garret, not in a lovely villa like our Cavaradossi. Though he tells me he has hot water and a view of the Panthéon. Ah, there's the car!" A gray

sedan pulled to the curb, and Mrs. Hász lifted her arm and signaled to the driver. "Come tomorrow before noon. Twenty-six Benczúr utca. I'll have everything ready." She pulled the collar of her coat closer and ran down to the car, not pausing to look back at Andras.

"Well!" Tibor said, coming out to join him on the steps. "Suppose you tell me what that was all about."

"I'm to be an international courier. Madame Hász wants me to take a box to her son in Paris. We met at the bank the other day when I went to exchange pengő for francs."

"And you agreed?"

"I did."

Tibor sighed, glancing off toward the yellow streetcars passing along the boulevard. "It's going to be awfully dull around here without you, Andráska."

"Nonsense. I predict you'll have a girlfriend within a week."

"Oh, yes. Every girl goes mad for a penniless shoe clerk."

Andras smiled. "At last, a little self-pity! I was beginning to resent you for being so generous and coolheaded."

"Not at all. I could kill you for leaving. But what good would that do? Then neither of us would get to go abroad." He grinned, but his eyes were grave behind his silver-rimmed spectacles. He linked arms with Andras and pulled him down the steps, humming a few bars from the overture. It was only three blocks to their building on Hársfa utca; when they reached the entry they paused for a last breath of night air before going up to the apartment. The sky above the Operaház was pale orange with reflected light, and the streetcar bells echoed from the boulevard. In the semidarkness Tibor seemed to Andras as handsome as a movie legend, his hat set at a daring angle, his white silk evening scarf thrown over one shoulder. He looked at that moment like a man ready to take up a thrilling and unconventional life, a man far better suited than Andras to step off a railway car in a foreign land and claim his place there. Then he winked and pulled the key from his pocket, and in another moment they were racing up the stairs like gimnázium boys.

Mrs. Hász lived near the Városliget, the city park with its storybook castle and its vast rococo outdoor baths. The house on Benczúr utca was an Italianate villa of creamy yellow stucco, surrounded on three sides by hidden gardens; the tops of espaliered trees rose from behind a white stone wall. Andras could make out the faint splash of a fountain, the

scratch of a gardener's rake. It struck him as an unlikely place for Jewish people to live, but at the entrance there was a mezuzah nailed to the doorframe—a silver cylinder wrapped in gold ivy. When he pressed the doorbell, a five-note chime sounded from inside. Then came the approaching click of heels on marble, and the throwing back of heavy bolts. A silver-haired housemaid opened the door and ushered him in. He stepped into a domed entrance hall with a floor of pink marble, an inlaid table, a sheaf of calla lilies in a Chinese vase.

"Madame Hász is in the sitting room," the housemaid said.

He followed her across the entry hall and down a vaulted corridor, and they stopped just outside a doorway through which he could hear the crescendo and decrescendo of women's voices. He couldn't make out the words, but it was clear that there was an argument in progress: One voice climbed and peaked and dropped off; another, quieter than the first, rose and insisted and fell silent.

"Wait here a moment," the housemaid said, and went in to announce Andras's arrival. At the announcement the voices exchanged another brief volley, as if the argument had something to do with Andras himself. Then the housemaid reappeared and ushered Andras into a large bright room that smelled of buttered toast and flowers. On the floor were pink-and-gold Persian rugs; white damask chairs stood in conversation with a pair of salmon-colored sofas, and a low table held a bowl of yellow roses. Mrs. Hász had risen from her chair in the corner. At a writing desk near the window sat an older woman in widow's black, her hair covered with a lace shawl. She held a wax-sealed letter, which she set atop a pile of books and pinned beneath a glass paperweight. Mrs. Hász crossed the room to meet Andras and pressed his hand in her large cold one.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "This is my mother-in-law, the elder Mrs. Hász." She nodded toward the woman in black. The woman was of delicate build, with a deep-lined face that Andras found lovely despite its aura of grief; her large gray eyes radiated quiet pain. He gave a bow and pronounced the formal greeting: *Kezét csókolom*, I kiss your hand.

The elder Mrs. Hász nodded in return. "So you've agreed to take a box to József," she said. "That was very kind of you. I'm sure you have a great deal to think about already."

"It's no trouble at all."

"We won't keep you long," said the younger Mrs. Hász. "Simon is packing the last items now. I'll ring for something to eat in the meantime. You look famished."

"Oh, no, please don't bother," Andras said. In fact, the smell of toast had reminded him that he hadn't eaten all day; but he worried that even the smallest meal in that house would require a lengthy ceremony, one whose rules were foreign to him. And he was in a hurry: His train left in three hours.

"Young men can always eat," said the younger Mrs. Hász, calling the housemaid to her side. She gave a few instructions and sent the woman on her way.

The elder Mrs. Hász left her chair at the writing desk and beckoned Andras to sit beside her on one of the salmon-colored sofas. He sat down, worrying that his trousers would leave a mark on the silk; he would have needed a different grade of clothing altogether, it seemed to him, to pass an hour safely in that house. The elder Mrs. Hász folded her slim hands on her lap and asked Andras what he would study in Paris.

"Architecture," Andras said.

"Indeed. So you'll be a classmate of József's at the Beaux-Arts, then?"

"I'll be at the École Spéciale," Andras said. "Not the Beaux-Arts."

The younger Mrs. Hász settled herself on the opposite sofa. "The École Spéciale? I haven't heard József mention it."

"It's rather more of a trade school than the Beaux-Arts," Andras said. "That's what I understand, anyway. I'll be there on a scholarship from the Izraelita Hitközség. It was a happy accident, actually."

"An accident?"

And Andras explained: The editor of *Past and Future*, the magazine where he worked, had submitted some of Andras's cover designs for an exhibition in Paris—a show of work by young Central European artists. His covers had been selected and exhibited; a professor from the École Spéciale had seen the show and had made inquiries about Andras. The editor had told him that Andras wanted to become an architect, but that it was difficult for Jewish students to get into architecture school in Hungary: A defunct numerus clausus, which in the twenties had restricted the number of Jewish students to six percent, still haunted the admissions practices of Hungarian universities. The professor from the École Spéciale had written letters, had petitioned his admissions board to give Andras a place in the incoming class. The Budapest Jewish community association, the Izraelita Hitközség, had put up the money for tuition, room, and board. It had all happened in a matter of weeks, and at every moment it seemed as if it might fall through. But it hadn't; he was going. His classes would begin six days from now.

"Ah," said the younger Mrs. Hász. "How fortunate! And a scholar-

ship, too!" But at the last words she lowered her eyes, and Andras experienced the return of a feeling from his school days in Debrecen: a sudden shame, as if he'd been stripped to his underclothes. A few times he'd spent weekend afternoons at the homes of boys who lived in town, whose fathers were barristers or bankers, who didn't have to board with poor families—boys who slept alone in their beds at night and wore ironed shirts to school and ate lunch at home every day. Some of these boys' mothers treated him with solicitous pity, others with polite distaste. In their presence he'd felt similarly naked. Now he forced himself to look at József's mother as he said, "Yes, it's very lucky."

"And where will you live in Paris?"

He rubbed his damp palms against his knees. "The Latin Quarter, I suppose."

"But where will you stay when you arrive?"

"I imagine I'll just ask someone where students take rooms."

"Nonsense," said the elder Mrs. Hász, covering his hand with her own. "You'll go to József's, that's what you'll do."

The younger Mrs. Hász gave a cough and smoothed her hair. "We shouldn't make commitments for József," she said. "He may not have room for a guest."

"Oh, Elza, you're a terrible snob," said the elder Mrs. Hász. "Mr. Lévi is doing a service for József. Surely József can spare a sofa for him, at least for a few days. We'll wire him this afternoon."

"Here are the sandwiches," said the younger, visibly relieved by the distraction.

The housemaid wheeled a tea cart into the room. In addition to the tea service there was a glass cake stand with a stack of sandwiches so pale they looked to be made of snow. A pair of scissorlike silver tongs lay beside the pedestal, as if to suggest that sandwiches like these were not meant to be touched by human hands. The elder Mrs. Hász took up the tongs and piled sandwiches onto Andras's plate, more than he would have dared to take for himself. When the younger Mrs. Hász herself picked up a sandwich without the aid of silverware or tongs, Andras made bold to eat one of his own. It consisted of dilled cream cheese on soft white bread from which the crusts had been cut. Paper-thin slices of yellow pepper provided the only indication that the sandwich had originated from within the borders of Hungary.

While the younger Mrs. Hász poured Andras a cup of tea, the elder went to the writing desk and withdrew a white card upon which she asked

Andras to write his name and travel information. She would wire József, who would be waiting at the station in Paris. She offered him a glass pen with a gold nib so fine he was afraid to use it. He leaned over the low table and wrote the information in his blocky print, terrified that he would break the nib or drip ink onto the Persian rug. Instead he inked his fingers, a fact he apprehended only when he looked down at his final sandwich and saw that the bread was stained purple. He wondered how long it would be until Simon, whoever that was, appeared with the box for József. A sound of hammering came from far off down the hallway; he hoped it was the box being closed.

It seemed to please the elder Mrs. Hász to see that Andras had finished his sandwiches. She gave him her grief-etched smile. "This will be your first time in Paris, then."

"Yes," Andras said. "My first time out of the country."

"Don't let my grandson offend you," she said. "He's a sweet child once you get to know him."

"József is a perfect gentleman," said the younger Mrs. Hász, flushing to the roots of her close-set curls.

"It's kind of you to wire him," Andras said.

"Not at all," said the elder Mrs. Hász. She wrote József's address on another card and gave it to Andras. A moment later, a man in butler's livery entered the sitting room with an enormous wooden crate in his arms.

"Thank you, Simon," said the younger Mrs. Hász. "You may leave it there."

The man set the crate down on the rug and retreated. Andras glanced at the gold clock on the mantel. "Thank you for the sandwiches," he said. "I'd better be off now."

"Stay another moment, if you don't mind," said the elder Mrs. Hász. "I'd like to ask you to take one more thing." She went to the writing desk and slid the sealed letter from beneath its paperweight.

"Excuse me, Mr. Lévi," said the younger. She rose and crossed the room to meet her mother-in-law, and put a hand on her arm. "We've already discussed this."

"I won't repeat myself, then," said the elder Mrs. Hász, lowering her voice. "Kindly remove your hand, Elza."

The younger Mrs. Hász shook her head. "György would agree with me. It's unwise."

"My son is a good man, but he doesn't always know what's wise and what is not," said the elder. She extricated her arm gently from the

younger woman's grasp, returned to the salmon-colored sofa, and handed the envelope to Andras. Written on its face was the name C. Morgenstern and an address in Paris.

"It's a message for a family friend," said the elder Mrs. Hász, her eyes steady on Andras's. "Perhaps you'll think me overcautious, but for certain matters I don't trust the Hungarian post. Things can get lost, you know, or fall into the wrong hands." She kept her gaze fixed upon him as she spoke, seeming to ask him not to question what she meant, nor what matters might be delicate enough to require this degree of caution. "If you please, I'd rather you not mention it to anyone. Particularly not to my grandson. Just buy a stamp and drop this into a mailbox once you get to Paris. You'll be doing me a great favor."

Andras put the letter into his breast pocket. "Easily done," he said.

The younger Mrs. Hász stood rigid beside the writing desk, her cheeks bright beneath their patina of powder. One hand still rested on the stack of books, as though she might call the letter back across the room and have it there again. But there was nothing to be done, Andras saw; the elder Mrs. Hász had won, and the younger now had to proceed as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. She composed her expression and smoothed her gray skirt, returning to the sofa where Andras sat.

"Well," she said, and folded her hands. "It seems we've concluded our business. I hope my son will be a help to you in Paris."

"I'm certain he will," Andras said. "Is that the box you'd like me to take?"

"It is," said the younger Mrs. Hász, and gestured him toward it.

The wooden crate was large enough to contain a pair of picnic hampers. When Andras lifted it, he felt a deep tug in his intestines. He took a few staggering steps toward the door.

"Dear me," said the younger Mrs. Hász. "Can you manage?"

Andras ventured a mute nod.

"Oh, no. You mustn't strain yourself." She pressed a button in the wall and Simon reappeared a moment later. He took the box from Andras and strode out through the front door of the house. Andras followed, and the elder Mrs. Hász accompanied him to the driveway, where the long gray car was waiting. Apparently they meant to send him home in it. It was of English make, a Bentley. He wished Tibor were there to see it.

The elder Mrs. Hász put a hand on his sleeve. "Thank you for everything," she said.

"It's a pleasure," Andras said, and bowed in farewell.

She pressed his arm and went inside; the door closed behind her without a sound. As the car pulled away, Andras found himself twisting backward to look at the house again. He searched the windows, unsure of what he expected to see. There was no movement, no curtain-flutter or glimpse of a face. He imagined the younger Mrs. Hász returning to the drawing room in wordless frustration, the elder retreating deeper behind that butter-colored façade, entering a room whose overstuffed furniture seemed to suffocate her, a room whose windows offered a comfortless view. He turned away and rested an arm on the box for József, and gave his Hársfa utca address for the last time.

CHAPTER TWO

The Western Europe Express

He told Tibor about the letter, of course; he couldn't have kept a secret like that from his brother. In their shared bedroom, Tibor took the envelope and held it up to the light. It was sealed with a clot of red wax into which the elder Mrs. Hász had pressed her monogram.

"What do you make of it?" Andras said.

"Operatic intrigues," Tibor said, and smiled. "An old lady's fancy, coupled with paranoia about the unreliability of the post. A former paramour, this Morgenstern on the rue de Sévigné. That's what I'd bet." He returned the letter to Andras. "Now you're a player in their romance."

Andras tucked the letter into a pocket of his suitcase and told himself not to forget it. Then he checked his list for the fiftieth time, and found that there was nothing left to do now but to leave for Paris. To save the taxi fare, he and Tibor borrowed a wheelbarrow from the grocer next door and wheeled Andras's suitcase and József's enormous box all the way to Nyugati Station. At the ticket window there was a disagreement over Andras's passport, which apparently looked too new to be authentic; an emigration officer had to be consulted, and then a more exalted officer, and finally an über-officer in a coat peppered with gold buttons, who made a tiny mark on the edge of the passport and reprimanded the other officers for calling him away from his duties. Minutes after the matter had been settled, Andras, fumbling with his leather satchel, dropped his passport into the narrow gap between the platform and the train. A sympathetic gentleman offered his umbrella; Tibor inserted the umbrella between platform and train and slid the passport to a place where he could retrieve it.

"I'd say it looks authentic now," Tibor said, handing it over. The passport was smudged with dirt and torn at one corner where Tibor had stabbed it with the umbrella. Andras replaced it in his pocket and they walked down the platform to the door of his third-class carriage, where a conductor in a red-and-gold cap ushered passengers aboard.

"Well," Tibor said. "I suppose you'd better find your seat." His eyes

were damp behind his glasses, and he put a hand on Andras's arm. "Hold on to that passport from now on."

"I will," Andras said, not making a move to board the train. The great city of Paris awaited; suddenly he felt lightheaded with dread.

"All aboard," the conductor said, and gave Andras a significant look.

Tibor kissed Andras on both cheeks and drew him close for a long moment. When they were boys going off to school, their father had always put his hands on their heads and said the prayer for travel before he let them on the train; now Tibor whispered the words under his breath. *May God direct your steps toward tranquility and keep you from the hands of every foe. May you be safe from all misfortune on this earth. May God grant you mercy in his eyes and in the eyes of all who see you.* He kissed Andras again. "You'll come back a worldly man," he said. "An architect. You'll build me a house. I'm counting on it, do you hear?"

Andras couldn't speak. He let out a long breath and looked down at the smooth concrete of the platform, where travel stickers had adhered in multinational profusion. Germany. Italy. France. The tie to his brother felt visceral, vascular, as though they were linked at the chest; the idea of boarding a train to be taken away from him seemed as wrong as ceasing to breathe. The train whistle blew.

Tibor removed his glasses and pressed the corners of his eyes. "Enough of this," he said. "I'll see you before long. Now go."

Sometime after dark, Andras found himself looking out the window at a little town where the street signs and shop signs were all in German. The train must have slipped over the border without his knowing it; while he had been asleep with a book of Petőfi poems on his lap, they had left the landlocked ovulet of Hungary and entered the larger world. He cupped his hands against the glass and looked for Austrians in the narrow lanes, but could see none; gradually the houses became smaller and farther apart, and the town dwindled into countryside. Austrian barns, shadowy in moonlight. Austrian cows. An Austrian wagon, piled with silver hay. In the far distance, against a night-blue sky, the deeper blue of mountains. He opened the window a few inches; the air outside was crisp and smelled of woodsmoke.

He had the strange sensation of not knowing who he was, of having traveled off the map of his own existence. It was the opposite of the feeling he had every time he traveled east between Budapest and Konyár to

see his parents; on those trips to his own birthplace there was a sense of moving deeper into himself, toward some essential core, as if toward the rice-sized miniature at the center of the Russian nesting doll his mother kept on the windowsill in her kitchen. But who might he imagine himself to be now, this Andras Lévi on a train passing westward through Austria? Before he'd left Budapest, he had scarcely considered how ill-equipped he was for an adventure like this one, a five-year course of study at an architectural college in Paris. Vienna or Prague he might have managed; he had always gotten high marks in German, which he'd studied since the age of twelve. But it was Paris and the École Spéciale that wanted him, and now he would have to get by on his two years of half-forgotten French. He knew little more than a smattering of food names, body parts, and laudatory adjectives. Like the other boys at his school in Debrecen, he had memorized the French words for the sexual positions that appeared on a set of old photographs passed along from one generation of students to another: *croupade*, *les ciseaux*, *à la grecque*. The cards were so old, and had been handled so thoroughly, that the images of intertwined couples were visible only as silver ghosts, and only when the cards were held at a particular angle to the light. Beyond that, what did he know of French—or, for that matter, of France? He knew that the country bordered the Mediterranean on one side and the Atlantic on another. He knew a little about the troop movements and battles of the Great War. He knew, of course, about the great cathedrals at Reims and at Chartres; he knew about Notre-Dame, about Sacré-Coeur, about the Louvre. And that was all, give or take a fragmentary fact. In the few weeks he'd had to prepare for the trip, he'd tortured the pages of his antiquated phrase book, bought cheap at a used bookstore on Szent István körút. The book must have predated the Great War; it offered translations for phrases like *Where might I hire a team of horses?* and *I am Hungarian but my friend is Prussian*.

Last weekend when he'd gone home to Konyár say goodbye to his parents, he'd found himself confessing his fears to his father as they walked through the orchard after dinner. He hadn't meant to say anything; between the boys and their father was the tacit understanding that as Hungarian men, they were not to show any sign of weakness, even at times of crisis. But as they passed between the apple rows, kicking through the knee-high stems of wild grass, Andras felt compelled to speak. Why, he wondered aloud, had he been singled out for recognition among all the artists in the show in Paris? How had the École Spéciale admissions board determined that *he*, in particular, deserved their favor?

Even if his pieces had shown some special merit, who was to say he could ever produce work like that again, or, more to the point, that he'd succeed at the study of architecture, a discipline vastly different from any he'd undertaken before? At best, he told his father, he was the beneficiary of misplaced faith; at worst, a simple fraud.

His father threw his head back and laughed. "A fraud?" he said. "You, who used to read aloud to me from Miklós Ybl when you were eight years old?"

"It's one thing to love an art and another to be good at it."

"There was a time when men studied architecture just because it was a noble pursuit," his father said.

"There are nobler pursuits. The medical arts, for example."

"That's your brother's talent. You've got your own. And now you've got time and money to court it."

"And what if I fail?"

"Ah! Then you'll have a story to tell."

Andras picked up a fallen branch from the ground and switched at the long grass. "It seems selfish," he said. "Going off to school in Paris, and at someone else's expense."

"You'd be going at my expense if I could afford it, believe me. I won't have you think of it as selfish."

"What if you get pneumonia again this year? The lumberyard can't run itself."

"Why not? I've got the foreman and five good sawyers. And Mátyás isn't far away if I need more help."

"Mátyás, that little crow?" Andras shook his head. "Even if you could catch him, you'd be lucky to get any work out of him."

"Oh, I could get work out of him," his father said. "Though I hope I won't have to. That scapegrace will have trouble enough graduating, with all the foolery he's gotten into this past year. Did you know he's joined some sort of dance troupe? He's performing nights at a club and missing his morning classes."

"I've heard all about it. All the more reason I shouldn't be going off to school so far away. Once he moves to Budapest, someone's got to look after him."

"It's not your fault you can't go to school in Budapest," his father said. "You're at the mercy of your circumstances. I know something of that. But you do what you can with what you've got."

Andras understood what he meant. His father had gone to the Jewish theological seminary in Prague, and might have become a rabbi if it

hadn't been for his own father's early death; a series of tragedies had attended him through his twenties, enough to have made a weaker man surrender to despair. Since then he'd experienced a reversal of fortune so profound that everyone in the village believed he must have been particularly pitied and favored by the Almighty. But Andras knew that everything good that had come to him was the result of his own sheer stubbornness and hard work.

"It's a blessing you're going to Paris," his father said. "Better to get out of this country where Jewish men have to feel second-class. I can promise you that's not going to improve while you're gone, though let's hope it won't get worse."

Now, as Andras rode westward in the darkened railway carriage, he heard those words in his mind again; he understood that there had been another fear beneath the ones he'd spoken aloud. He found himself thinking of a newspaper story he'd read recently about a horrible thing that had happened a few weeks earlier in the Polish town of Sandomierz: In the middle of the night the windows of shops in the Jewish Quarter had been broken, and small paper-wrapped projectiles had been thrown inside. When the shop owners unwrapped the projectiles, they saw that they were the sawn-off hooves of goats. *Jews' Feet*, the paper wrappings read.

Nothing like that had ever happened in Konyár; Jews and non-Jews had lived there in relative peace for centuries. But the seeds were there, Andras knew. At his primary school in Konyár, his schoolmates had called him Zsidócska, little Jew; when they'd all gone swimming, his circumcision had been a mark of shame. One time they held him down and tried to force a sliver of pork sausage between his clenched teeth. Those boys' older brothers had tormented Tibor, and a younger set had been waiting for Mátyás when he got to school. How would those Konyár boys, now grown into men, read the news from Poland? What seemed an atrocity to him might seem to them like justice, or permission. He put his head against the cool glass of the window and stared into the unfamiliar landscape, surprised only by how much it looked like the flatland country where he had been born.

In Vienna the train stopped at a station far grander than any Andras had ever seen. The façade, ten stories high, was composed of glass panes supported by a gridwork of gilded iron; the supports were curlicued and flowered and cherubed in a design that seemed better suited to a boudoir

than a train station. Andras got off the train and followed the scent of bread to a cart where a woman in a white cap was selling salt-studded pretzels. But the woman wouldn't take his pengő or his francs. In her insistent German she tried to explain what Andras must do, pointing him toward the money-changing booth. The line at the booth snaked around a corner. Andras looked at the station clock and then at the stack of pretzels. It had been eight hours since he'd eaten the delicate sandwiches at the house on Benczúr utca.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to find the gentleman from Keleti Station, the one who had let Tibor use his umbrella to retrieve Andras's passport. The man was dressed in a gray traveling suit and a light overcoat; the dull gold of a watch chain shone against his vest. He was barrel-chested and tall, his dark hair brushed back in waves from a high domed forehead. He carried a glossy briefcase and a copy of *La Revue du Cinema*.

"Let me buy you a pretzel," he said. "I've got some schillings."

"You've been too kind already," Andras said.

But the man stepped forward and bought two pretzels, and they went to a nearby bench to eat. The gentleman pulled a monogrammed handkerchief from a pocket and spread it over his trouser legs.

"I like a fresh-made pretzel better than anything they serve in the dining car," the man said. "Besides, the first-class passengers tend to be first-class bores."

Andras nodded, eating in silence. The pretzel was still hot, the salt electric on his tongue.

"I gather you're going on past Vienna," the man said.

"Paris," Andras ventured. "I'm going there to study."

The man turned his deep-lined eyes on Andras and scrutinized him for a long moment. "A future scientist? A man of law?"

"Architecture," Andras said.

"Very good. A practical art."

"And yourself?" Andras asked. "What's your destination?"

"The same as yours," the man said. "I run a theater in Paris, the Sarah-Bernhardt. Though it might be more correct to say the Sarah-Bernhardt runs me. Like a demanding mistress, I'm afraid. Theater: Now, there's an impractical art."

"Must art be practical?"

The man laughed. "No, indeed." And then: "Do you go to the theater?"

"Not often enough."

"You'll have to come to the Sarah-Bernhardt, then. Present my card at

the box office and tell them I sent you. Say you're a *compatriote* of mine." He extracted a card from a gold case and handed it to Andras. *NOVAK Zoltán, metteur en scène, Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt.*

Andras had heard of Sarah Bernhardt but knew little about her. "Did Madame Bernhardt perform there?" he asked. "Or"—more hesitantly—"does she still?"

The man folded the paper wrapper of his pretzel. "She did," he said. "For many years. Back then it was called Théâtre de la Ville. But that was before my time. Madame Bernhardt is long dead, I'm afraid."

"I'm an ignoramus," Andras said.

"Not at all. You remind me of myself as a young man, off to Paris for the first time. You'll be fine. You come from a fine family. I saw the way your brother looked out for you. Keep my card, in any case. Zoltán Novak."

"Andras Lévi." They shook hands, then returned to their railway cars—Novak to the first-class wagon-lit, Andras to the lesser comforts of third class.

It took him another two days to get to Paris, two days during which he had to travel through Germany, into the source of the growing dread that radiated across Europe. In Stuttgart there was a delay, a mechanical problem that had to be fixed before the train could go on. Andras was dizzy with hunger. He had no choice but to exchange a few francs for reichsmarks and find something to eat. At the exchange counter, a gap-toothed matron in a gray tunic made him sign a document affirming that he would spend all the exchanged money within the borders of Germany. He tried to enter a café near the station to buy a sandwich, but on the door there was a small sign, hand-lettered in Gothic characters, that read *Jews Not Wanted.* He looked through the glass door at a young girl reading a comic book behind the pastry counter. She must have been fifteen or sixteen, a white kerchief on her head, a thin gold chain at her throat. She raised her eyes and smiled at Andras. He took a step back and glanced down at the reichsmark coins in his hand—on one side an eagle with a wreathed swastika in its claws, on the other the mustachioed profile of Paul von Hindenburg—then back over his shoulder at the girl in the shop. The reichsmarks were nothing more than a few drops of blood in the country's vast economic circulatory system, but suddenly he felt desperate to be rid of them; he didn't want to eat the food they could buy him, even if he found a shop where *Juden* were not *unerwünscht.* Quickly,

making sure no one saw what he was doing, he knelt and dropped the coins into the echoing mouth of a storm drain. Then he returned to the train without having eaten anything, and rode hungry through the final hundred kilometers of Germany. From the platform of every small-town German station, Nazi flags fluttered in the slipstream of the train. The red flag spilled from the topmost story of buildings, decorated the awnings of houses, appeared in miniature in the hands of a group of children marching in the courtyard of a school beside the tracks. By the time they crossed the border into France, Andras felt as though he'd been holding his breath for hours.

They passed through the rolling countryside and the little half-timbered villages and the interminable flat suburbs and finally the outer arrondissements of Paris itself. It was eleven o'clock at night before they reached the station. Struggling with his leather satchel, his overcoat, his portfolio, Andras made his way down the aisle of the train and out onto the platform. On the wall opposite, a mural fifty feet high showed serious young soldiers, their eyes hooded with determination, leaving to fight the Great War. On another wall hung a series of cloth banners that depicted a more recent battle—a Spanish one, Andras guessed from the soldiers' uniforms. The overhead loudspeakers crackled with French; among the travelers on the platform, the low buzz of French and the lilt of Italian crossed the harsher cadences of German and Polish and Czech. Andras scanned the crowd for a young man in an expensive overcoat who seemed to be looking for someone. He hadn't asked for a description or a photograph of József. It hadn't occurred to him that they might have trouble finding each other. But an increasing number of passengers filled the platform, and Parisians ran to greet them, and József failed to appear. Amid the crush Andras caught a glimpse of Zoltán Novak; a woman in a smart hat and a fur-collared coat threw her arms around him. Novak kissed the woman and led her away from the train, and porters followed with his luggage.

Andras retrieved his own suitcase and the enormous box for József. He stood and waited as the crowd became even more dense and then began to dissipate. Still no brisk-looking young man stepped forward to conduct him into a life in Paris. He sat down on the wooden crate, suddenly lightheaded. He needed a place to sleep. He needed to eat. In a few days' time he was supposed to appear at the École Spéciale, ready to begin his studies. He looked toward the row of doors marked *Sortie*, at the lights of cars passing on the street outside. A quarter of an hour rolled by, and then another, without any sign of József Hász.

He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the heavy card on which the elder Mrs. Hász had written her grandson's address. This was all the direction he had. For six francs Andras recruited a walrus-faced porter to help him load his luggage and József's enormous box into a taxi. He gave the driver József's address and they rushed off in the direction of the Quartier Latin. As they sped along, the taxi driver kept up a steady stream of jocose French, of which Andras understood not a word.

He was hardly aware of what they passed on the way to József Hász's. Fog tumbled in billows through the light of the streetlamps, and wet leaves blew against the windows of the cab. The gold-lit buildings spun by in a rush; the streets were full of Saturday night revelers, men and women with their arms slung loosely around each other. The cab sped over a river that must have been the Seine, and for an instant Andras allowed himself to imagine that they were passing over the Danube, that he was back in Budapest, and that in a short time he'd find himself home at the apartment on Hársfa utca, where he could climb the stairs and crawl into bed with Tibor. But then the taxi stopped in front of a gray stone building and the driver climbed out to unload Andras's luggage. Andras fumbled in his pocket for more money. The driver tipped his hat, took the francs Andras offered, and said something that sounded like the Hungarian word *bocsánat*, I'm sorry, but which Andras later understood to be *bon chance*. Then the cab pulled away, leaving Andras alone on a sidewalk of the Quartier Latin.