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OR YOUR MONEY BACK
LOVE IT
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FEVER AT DAWN

*They had lost everything—except
the chance to find each other.*



PÉTER GÁRDOS

*'A magnificent novel, tonally flawless, its humour defiant
in the face of vast tragedy.'* JOAN LONDON

One

MY FATHER, Miklós, sailed to Sweden on a rainy summer's day three weeks after the Second World War ended. He was twenty-five years old. An angry north wind lashed the Baltic Sea into a three-metre swell, and he lay on the lower deck while the ship plunged and bucked. Around him, passengers clung desperately to their straw mattresses.

They had been at sea for less than an hour when Miklós was taken ill. He began to cough up bloody foam, and then he started to wheeze so loudly that he almost drowned out the waves pounding the hull. He was one of the more serious cases, parked in the first row right next to the swing door. Two sailors

picked up his skeletal body and carried him into a nearby cabin.

The doctor didn't hesitate. There was no time for painkillers. Relying on luck to hit the right spot between two ribs, he stuck a large needle into my father's chest. Half a litre of fluid drained from his lungs. When the aspirator arrived, the doctor swapped the needle for a plastic tube and siphoned off another litre and a half of mucus.

Miklós felt better.

When the captain learned that the doctor had saved a passenger's life, he granted the sick man a special favour: he had him wrapped in a thick blanket and taken out to sit on the deck. Heavy clouds were gathering over the granite water. The captain, impeccable in his uniform, stood beside Miklós's deckchair.

'Do you speak German?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Congratulations on your survival.'

In different circumstances, this conversation might have led somewhere. But Miklós was in no state to chat. It was all he could do to acknowledge the situation.

'I'm alive.'

The captain looked him up and down. My father's ashen skin was stretched over his skull, and there were ugly warts on his face. His pupils were magnified by his glasses, and his mouth was a dark yawning void. He virtually hadn't a tooth to call his own. I'm not quite sure why. Maybe three burly louts had beaten his scrawny frame to a pulp in an air-raid shelter lit by a naked bulb swinging from the ceiling. Maybe one of these thugs had

grabbed a flat iron and used it over and over to bash Miklós in the face. According to the official version, which was rather short on detail, most of his teeth had been knocked out in the prison on Margit Street in Budapest in 1944, when he was arrested as a deserter from a Jewish forced-labour unit.

But now he was alive. And despite the slight whistle when he took a breath his lungs were dutifully processing the crisp salty air.

The captain peered through his telescope. ‘We’re docking in Malmö for five minutes.’

This didn’t really mean anything to Miklós. He was one of 224 concentration-camp survivors who were being shipped from Lübeck in Germany to Stockholm. Some of them were in such bad shape that they wanted nothing more than to survive the journey. A few minutes in Malmö was neither here nor there.

The captain, however, continued to explain the decision, as if to a superior. ‘The order came over the radio. This stop wasn’t part of my itinerary.’

The ship’s horn sounded as the docks of Malmö harbour became visible in the mist. A flock of seagulls circled.

The ship moored at the end of the pier. Two sailors disembarked and started jogging along the pier. Between them they carried a big empty basket—the kind washerwomen use to haul wet laundry up to the attic to hang out.

A crowd of women on bicycles was waiting at the approach to the pier. There must have been fifty of them, motionless and silent, gripping their handlebars. Many wore black headscarves.

They looked like ravens perched on a branch. It was only when the sailors reached the barrier that Miklós noticed the parcels and baskets hanging from the handlebars.

He felt the captain's hand on his shoulder. 'Some mad rabbi by the name of Kronheim dreamed this up,' the captain explained. 'He placed an ad in the papers saying that you people were arriving on this ship. He even managed to arrange for us to dock here.'

Each of the women dropped her parcel into the big laundry basket. One standing slightly back let go of her handlebars and her bicycle fell over. From where he sat on deck, Miklós heard the clang of the metal on the cobblestones. Given the length of the pier, this is quite inconceivable, yet whenever my father told this story he always included the clang.

Once they had collected all the packages, the sailors jogged back to the ship. This scene remained fixed in Miklós's mind: an improbably empty pier, the sailors running with the basket, and in the background the strange motionless army of women and their bicycles.

The parcels contained biscuits that these nameless women had baked to celebrate the arrival of the survivors in Sweden. As my father tasted the soft, buttery pastry in his toothless mouth, he could detect vanilla and raspberry, flavours so unfamiliar after years of camp food that he almost had to relearn them.

'Sweden welcomes you,' grunted the captain, as he turned away to give orders. The ship was already heading out to sea.

Miklós sat savouring his biscuits. High among the clouds, a

biplane drew away, dipping its wings in salute. When he saw it, my father began to feel he was truly alive.



By the end of the first week in July 1945, Miklós was in a crowded sixteen-bed hospital ward, a barracks-like wooden hut in a remote village called Lärbro on the island of Gotland. Propped up against a pillow, he was writing a letter. Sunlight poured through the window and nurses in crisply starched blouses, white bonnets and long linen skirts darted between the beds.

He had beautiful handwriting: shapely letters, elegant loops and just a hair's breadth between each word. When he finished his letter he put it in an envelope, sealed it and leaned it against the jug of water on his bedside table. Two hours later a nurse called Katrin picked it up and dropped it in the postbox with the other patients' mail.

Miklós rarely got out of his hospital bed, but two weeks after writing his letter he was allowed to sit out in the corridor. Each morning the post was handed out, and one day a letter came for him—straight from the Swedish Office for Refugees. It contained the names and addresses of 117 women, all of them young Hungarians whom nurses and doctors were trying to bring back to life in various temporary hospitals across Sweden. Miklós transcribed their details into a thin exercise book with square-ruled paper he had found somewhere.

By this time he had recovered from the dramatic pronouncement he had received a few days earlier.



Pressed against the X-ray machine, Miklós had done his best not to move. Dr Lindholm shouted at him from the other room. The doctor was a gangling figure, at least six foot six tall, and he spoke a funny sort of Hungarian. All his long vowels sounded the same, as if he were blowing up a balloon. He had run the Lärbro hospital—now temporarily enlarged to accommodate the intake of camp survivors—for the last dozen years. His wife, Márta, a tiny woman whom Miklós reckoned couldn't be more than four foot six, was a nurse and worked in the hospital too; she was Hungarian, which explained why the doctor tackled the language with such bravado.

'You hold breath! No frisking!' he bellowed.

A click and a hum—the X-ray was ready. Miklós relaxed his shoulders.

Dr Lindholm walked over and stood beside him, gazing with compassion at a point slightly above his head. Miklós was slumped, his sunken chest naked against the machine, as if he never wanted to get dressed again. His glasses had steamed up.

'What you say you occupied with, Miklós?' the doctor asked.

'I was a journalist. And poet.'

'Ah! Engineer of the soul. Very good.'

Miklós shifted from one foot to the other. He was cold.

‘Dress. Why you stand around?’

Miklós shuffled over to the corner of the room and pulled on his pyjama jacket. ‘Is there a problem?’ he asked the doctor.

Lindholm still didn’t look at him. He started walking towards his office, waving at Miklós to follow him. He was muttering, almost to himself, ‘Is a problem.’

Erik Lindholm’s office looked onto the garden. On these warm midsummer evenings the island glittered in a bronze light that bathed the countryside. The dark furniture radiated comfort and safety.

Miklós sat in a leather armchair. Opposite him, on the other side of the desk, sat Dr Lindholm. He had changed into a smart waistcoat. He was flicking anxiously through Miklós’s medical reports. He switched on the sea-green glass desk lamp, though there was no real need for it.

‘How much you weigh now, Miklós?’

‘Forty-seven kilos.’

‘You see. It works like a clock.’

As a result of Dr Lindholm’s strict diet, Miklós had gained eighteen kilos in only a few weeks. My father kept buttoning and unbuttoning his pyjama jacket, which was far too big for him.

‘What temperature you have this morning?’

‘Thirty-eight point two.’

Dr Lindholm put the reports down on his desk. ‘I won’t beat away the bush any longer. Is that what they say? You are quite strong now to face facts.’

Miklós smiled. Almost all his teeth were made of a

palladium-based metal alloy that was acid-resistant, cheap and ugly. The day after he'd arrived in Lärbro, a dentist had come to see him. He took moulds of his mouth and warned him that the temporary plate he was getting would be more practical than aesthetic. In a trice the dentist had fitted the metal into his mouth.

Although Miklós's smile was anything but heart-warming, Dr Lindholm forced himself to look directly at him.

'I come straight at the point,' he said. 'It is easier. Six months. You have six months to live, Miklós.' He picked up an X-ray and held it to the light. 'Look. Come closer.'

Miklós obligingly stood up and hunched over the desk. Dr Lindholm's slender fingers roamed over the contoured landscape of the X-ray.

'Here, here, here and here. You see, Miklós? See these patches? This is your tuberculosis. Permanent damage. Nothing to be done about them, I'm afraid. Terrible thing, I have to say. In everyday words, the illness...gobbles the lungs. Can one say "gobble" in Hungarian?'

They stared at the X-ray. Miklós held himself up against the desk. He wasn't feeling very strong, but he managed a nod, thus confirming that the doctor had found a way through the tangle of his language. 'Gobble' was accurate enough to show what the future had in store for him; he didn't need technical terminology. After all, his father had owned a bookshop in Debrecen before the war. It was housed in Gambrinus Court in the Bishop's Palace, under the arcades, a few minutes' walk from the main square. The shop was named Gambrinus Booksellers

and consisted of three narrow, high-ceilinged rooms. In one room you could also buy stationery, and there was a lending library too. As a teenager Miklós would perch on top of the high wooden ladder and read books from all over the world—so he could certainly appreciate Lindholm’s poetic turn of phrase.

Dr Lindholm continued to stare into my father’s eyes. ‘As matters stand,’ he explained, ‘medical science says that you are too gone to come back. There will be good days. And bad ones. I will always be next to you. But I don’t want to lead you up the path. You have six months. Seven at most. My heart is heavy, but that is the truth.’

Miklós straightened up, smiling, and then flopped back into the roomy armchair. He seemed almost cheerful. The doctor wasn’t quite sure that he had understood or even heard the diagnosis. But Miklós was thinking of things far more important than his health.

Two

TWO DAYS after this conversation Miklós was allowed out for short walks in the beautiful hospital garden. He sat on one of the benches in the shade of a big tree with spreading branches. He rarely looked up. He wrote letter after letter, in pencil, in that attractive looping hand of his, using the hardcover Swedish edition of a novel by Martin Andersen Nexø as a desk. Miklós admired Nexø's political views and the silent courage of the workers in his books. Perhaps he remembered that the famous Danish author had also suffered from tuberculosis. Miklós wrote swiftly, placing a stone on the finished letters to stop the wind blowing them away.

The next day he knocked on Dr Lindholm's door. He was determined to charm the good doctor with his frankness. He needed his help.

At this time of day it was Dr Lindholm's custom to talk to his patients while seated on his sofa. He sat at one end in his white coat, while Miklós sat at the other end in his pyjamas.

The doctor fingered the stack of envelopes with surprise. 'Is not in tradition to ask patients who they write to and why. And not curiosity now that...' he mumbled.

'I know,' said Miklós. 'But I definitely want to let you in on this.'

'And there are 117 envelopes here? I congratulate you for diligence.' Dr Lindholm raised his arm as if he were gauging the weight of the letters. 'I ask the nurse to buy stamps for them,' he said obligingly. 'Always feel free to apply me for help in any financial matter.'

Miklós nonchalantly crossed his pyjama-clad legs, and grinned. 'All women.'

Dr Lindholm raised an eyebrow. 'Is that so?'

'Or rather, young women,' my father corrected. 'Hungarian girls. From the Debrecen region. That's where I was born.'

'I see,' said the doctor.

But he didn't. He hadn't a clue what Miklós intended with that pile of letters. He gave my father a sympathetic look—after all, this was a man who had been sentenced to death.

'A few weeks ago,' Miklós went on eagerly, 'I made an enquiry about women survivors convalescing in Sweden who

were born in or near Debrecen. Only those under thirty!

‘In hospitals? My God!’

They both knew that in addition to Lärbro there were a number of rehabilitation centres operating in Sweden. Miklós sat up straight. He was proud of his strategy. ‘And there are loads of girls in them,’ he went on excitedly. ‘Here’s the list of names.’

He took the sheet of paper out of his pocket and, blushing, handed it to Dr Lindholm. The names had been carefully assessed. He’d put a cross, a tick or a small triangle beside each one.

‘Aha! You look for acquaintances,’ exclaimed Dr Lindholm. ‘I’m in favour of that.’

‘You’re mistaken,’ said Miklós with a wink and a smile. ‘I’m looking for a wife. I’d like to get married!’

At last it was out.

Dr Lindholm frowned. ‘It seems, my dear Miklós, that I did not speak myself clearly the other day.’

‘You did, you did,’ Miklós reassured him.

‘The language is against me! Six months. Is all you have left. You know, when a doctor must say something like this, is dreadful.’

‘I understood you perfectly, Dr Lindholm,’ said Miklós.

They sat in uncomfortable silence, each on his end of the sofa. Dr Lindholm was trying to work out whether he should lecture someone who had been sentenced to death. Was it his job to beg his patient to think sensibly? Miklós was wondering whether it was worth trying to persuade Dr Lindholm, with all

his experience, to look on the bright side of things. The upshot was they left each other in peace.

That afternoon Miklós got into bed as prescribed and lay back on his pillows. It was four o'clock—nap time. Some of the patients in his hut were asleep, and others were playing cards. His friend Harry was practising the trickiest part of the last movement of a romantic sonata on his violin, over and over, with aggravating zeal.

Miklós was sticking stamps on his 117 envelopes. He licked and stuck, licked and stuck. When his mouth became dry he took a sip from the glass of water on his bedside table. He must have felt that Harry's violin was an appropriate accompaniment to this activity. The 117 letters could have been written with carbon paper. They were identical except for one thing—the name of the addressee.



Did Miklós ever wonder what these girls might feel when they opened the envelopes addressed to them? What did they think when they took out the letters and began to read his neat, swirling handwriting?

Oh, those girls! Sitting on the edges of their beds, on garden benches, in the corners of disinfected corridors, in front of thickened glass windows, stopping for a moment on worn staircases, under spreading lime trees, on the banks of miniature lakes, leaning against cold yellow tiles. Did my father see

them in his mind's eye as they unfolded the letters in their nightdresses or in the pale grey uniforms they wore in the rehabilitation centres? Confused at first, later smiling perhaps, heartbeat accelerating, skimming the lines over and over in astonishment.

Dear Nora, Dear Erzsébet, Dear Lili, Dear Zsuzsa,
Dear Sára, Dear Seréna, Dear Ágnes, Dear Giza,
Dear Baba, Dear Katalin, Dear Judit, Dear
Gabiella...

You are probably used to strangers chatting you up when you speak Hungarian, for no better reason than they are Hungarian too. We men can be so bad-mannered. For example, I addressed you by your first name on the pretext that we grew up in the same town. I don't know whether you already know me from Debrecen. Until my homeland ordered me to 'volunteer' for forced labour, I worked for the *Independent* newspaper, and my father owned a bookshop in Gambrinus Court.

Judging by your name and age, I have a feeling that I might know you. Did you by any chance ever live in Gambrinus Court?

Excuse me for writing in pencil, but I'm confined to bed for a few days on doctor's orders, and we're not allowed to use ink in bed.

~

Lili Reich was one of the 117 women who received a letter. She was an eighteen-year-old patient at the Smålandsstenar rehabilitation hospital. It was early September. She opened the envelope and scanned its contents. The young man from distant Lärbro did have lovely handwriting. But he must have mixed her up with someone else. She promptly forgot the whole thing.

Besides, she was terribly excited about her own plans. A few days earlier she and her two new girlfriends, Sára Stern and Judit Gold, had decided to put an end to the grey days of slow recuperation and set their hearts on staging an evening of Hungarian music in the hospital hall.

Lili had studied piano for eight years, Sára had sung in a choir and Judit had taken dance lessons. Judit had a large, pale face with fine dark hairs above her thin, rather severe lips. Quite the opposite of Sára, who was blonde and light boned with narrow shoulders and shapely legs. Two other girls, Erika Friedmann and Gitta Pláner, joined in just for fun. They banged out three copies of the thirty-minute program on the typewriter in the doctors' room and pinned them up around the hospital. On the night of the performance, the creaky wooden chairs in the hall filled with patients and curious visitors from the nearby village of Smålandsstenar.

The concert was a resounding success. After the last piece, a lively Hungarian dance, the *csárdás*, the audience gave the five blushing girls a standing ovation.

As she ran offstage, Lili felt a sudden unbearable pain in her stomach. She hunched over, pressing her hand to her belly,

moaning. And then she lay down; her forehead was bathed in sweat.

‘What’s the matter, Lili?’ asked Sára, who had become her closest friend, crouching down beside her.

‘It hurts dreadfully,’ she said, and passed out.

Lili couldn’t remember being put in the ambulance. She could only recall Sára’s blurry face saying something she couldn’t hear.

Later, she would often think that without this pain, which had something to do with her kidneys, she might never have met Miklós. If that hulking white ambulance hadn’t taken her to the military hospital more than a hundred kilometres away in Eksjö; if, when she came to visit, Judit hadn’t brought Miklós’s letter, along with her toothbrush and diary; if, on that visit, Judit hadn’t persuaded her, against all common sense, to write a few words to the nice young man (for the sake of humanity if nothing else); that’s where the story would have ended.

But as it happened, on one of those interminable hospital evenings, once the noise filtering in from the corridor and the clanging of the old-fashioned lift with its grating doors had ebbed away and the bulb above her bed was casting a pale light onto her blanket, Lili took a sheet of paper and, after a bit of thought, started to write.

Dear Miklós,

I’m unlikely to be the person you were thinking of, because, though I was born in Debrecen, I lived in Budapest from the age of one. Nonetheless, I’ve

thought a lot about you. Your friendly letter was so comforting that I would be happy for you to write again.

That was a half-truth, of course. Confined to bed with a strange new illness, out of fear, by way of escape or just to stave off boredom, Lili allowed herself to daydream.

As for myself, neatly ironed trousers or a smart haircut don't do anything. What touches me is the value inside someone.



Miklós had grown a little stronger. He could now walk into town with Harry. Each of the patients received five kronor a week pocket money. There were two cake shops in Lärbro. One of them had small round marble tables just like a café in Hungary. On the way there, Miklós and Harry ran into Kristin, a plump Swedish hairdresser, and Harry urged her to join them. So now the three of them were sitting at a marble table in a corner of the cake shop. Kristin was politely eating apple pie with a fork. The men each had a glass of soda water. They were speaking German, because the Hungarians were only just getting used to the melodic Swedish language.

'You are two very nice guys,' declared Kristin, the sugar from the icing trembling on her pale moustache. 'Where were you born exactly?'

Miklós sat up. ‘In Hajdúnánás,’ he boasted, as if he had uttered a magic word.

‘And I was born in Sajószentpéter,’ said Harry.

Kristin naturally attempted the impossible—to repeat what she’d heard. It sounded as if she were gargling. ‘Haydu...nana... Sayu...sent...peter...’

They laughed. Kristin nibbled her apple pie. This gave Harry time to think up a joke. He was good at jokes.

‘What did Adam say to Eve when they first met?’ he asked.

So keen was Kristin to work out the answer that she forgot to chew. Harry waited a bit, then stood up, miming that he was now stark naked.

‘Please, my lady, stand aside, because I’m not sure how much this thingamajig will grow!’ he declared, pointing down towards his fly.

Kristin didn’t understand at first, but then she blushed.

Miklós felt ashamed and took a sip of his soda. Harry, though, was just getting started.

‘Here’s another one,’ he blurted. ‘The lady of the house asked the new chambermaid if her references were good. The chambermaid nodded. “Yes, madam, they were satisfied with me everywhere.” “Can you cook?” The chambermaid nodded. “Do you like children?” The chambermaid nodded. “Yes, I do, but it’s better when the master of the house is careful.”’

Kristin giggled. Harry grabbed her hand and kissed it fervently. Kristin was about to remove her hand, but Harry had a tight grip and she decided not to resist for a moment or two.

Miklós took another sip of soda and looked away.

Then Kristin freed herself and got up, smoothing her skirt. 'I'm off to the ladies' room,' she announced, walking demurely across the café.

Harry switched to Hungarian right away. 'She only lives two blocks away.'

'How d'you know?'

'She said so. Don't you listen?'

'She likes you.'

'You, too.'

'For all I care,' replied Miklós, giving Harry a stern look.

'You haven't been in a café for years. You haven't seen a naked woman for years.'

'What's that got to do with it?' asked Miklós.

'At last we can get out of the hospital. We should start living!'

Kristin was now sashaying back to the table.

'What do you say to a sandwich?' whispered Harry, still in Hungarian.

'What sort of sandwich?'

'The two of us and her. Kristin in the middle.'

'Leave me out of it.'

Harry switched to German, almost in the same breath, and began to stroke Kristin's ankle under the table. 'I've been telling Miklós that I've fallen head over heels for you, dear Kristin. Do I have any chance?'

Kristin put a warning finger coquettishly on Harry's mouth.



Kristin rented a tiny flat on the third floor of a building in Nysvägen Street. The low rumble of traffic filtered in through the open window. She sat on the bed so that Harry could get to her more easily. The first test she set him was to mend a tear in the strap of her bra. ‘Are you finished yet?’ she asked, monitoring the process in the mirror.

‘Not quite. It’d be easier if you took it off.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘You’re torturing me.’

‘That’s the point. You should suffer. Restrain yourself. Do a bit of housework,’ replied Kristin, giggling.

Harry finished at last, breaking the thread off with his teeth. Kristin went over to the mirror, turning around and fingering the mended strap.

Harry grew redder and redder. Then he hugged her and clumsily tried to undo the bra. ‘I can cook, do the washing, scrub. I am a workhorse,’ he whispered.

By way of an answer Kristin kissed him.



When Harry came back an hour later, he found Miklós at the same marble table in the corner of the café. He was writing a letter and didn’t even look up when Harry flopped down beside him. The tip of his pencil seemed to glide over the white paper. Harry gave a deep dejected sigh.

When at last Miklós raised his head, he showed no surprise

at Harry's dismal expression.

'Aren't you in love any more?'

Harry swigged the remains of the soda in Miklós's glass. 'In love? I'm a wreck.'

'What happened?'

'She made me mend her bra. Then I undressed her. Her skin was so silky and firm!'

'Good. Now don't interrupt me, I've got to finish this,' said Miklós, returning to his letter.

Harry envied the way that Miklós could cut himself off from everything with the merest flick of his finger. 'But *I* wasn't firm. It doesn't work,' he muttered. 'It simply doesn't work.'

Miklós kept writing. 'What doesn't work?'

'I don't. And I used to do it five times a day. I could walk up and down with a bucket of water hanging from it.'

'Hanging from what?' Miklós enquired, biting the end of his pencil.

'Right now...a slug hangs between my legs. Soft, white and useless.'

Miklós found the right word. He smiled to himself and wrote it down, satisfied. Now he could comfort Harry.

'That's quite normal. Without feelings it doesn't work.'

Harry was chewing the side of his mouth in irritation. He slid the letter across the table and started to read. "'Dear Lili, I am twenty-five—'"

Miklós snatched at the letter. There was a brief tug of war, which Miklós won. He thrust the letter into his pocket.

PÉTER GÁRDOS

Dear Lili,

I am twenty-five. I used to be a journalist until the First Jewish Law got me thrown out of my job.

Miklós had a special gift for poetic licence. The truth was that he had been a journalist for exactly eight and a half days. He was taken on at the Debrecen *Independent* on a Monday, more as messenger boy on the police rounds than an actual journalist. It was the worst possible moment. The following week a law banning Jews from certain professions came into force. His newspaper career was over. But he kept that brief apprenticeship on his CV for the rest of his life. It can't have been easy for a nineteen-year-old to get over such a setback. One day he had a pencil behind his ear; the next he was shouting, 'Soda! Come and get your soda water!' as he leaned out from a horse-drawn cart and a bitter wind whistled around his ears.

After that I worked in a textile factory, then as a bloodhound in a credit agency; I had a job as a clerk, an advertising salesman and other similar excellent posts until 1941, when I was called up for forced labour. At the first opportunity, I escaped to the Russians. I spent a month washing dishes in a big restaurant in Csernovic before I joined a partisan group in Bukovina.

There were eight Hungarian deserters. The Red Army gave them a crash course in spying and dropped them behind

German lines. Looking back, it's obvious that the Russians didn't trust them. The lessons of history teach us that the Soviets didn't trust anybody. But when those Hungarian deserters turned up, they decided to enlist them.

I can imagine my father wearing a quilted jacket and a knapsack, clinging to the open door of an aeroplane. He looks down. Below him there's vertical space, clouds, and spreading countryside. He suffers from vertigo, feels dizzy, turns away and starts to vomit. Rough hands grab him from behind and shove him into the void.

On that dawn morning, somewhere in the vicinity of Nagyvárad, Hungarian soldiers with submachine guns were waiting in open woodland. When the parachute team floated just a few metres above the ground, the soldiers casually fired off a few rounds for target practice. Miklós was lucky. He was the only one they didn't hit. But as soon as he landed, they pounced on him and put him in handcuffs. That night he was transported to a prison in Budapest where, in the space of barely half an hour, he was relieved of most of his teeth.

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In the café in Lärbro, Harry looked at Miklós with admiration. 'How many have replied?'

'Eighteen.'

'Are you going to write back to all of them?'

‘Some of them, but she’s the one,’ Miklós answered, patting the pocket where he had hidden the letter.

I’ve introduced myself, now it’s your turn, Lili. First of all, please send a photo! Then tell me everything about yourself.

‘How do you know?’

‘I just do.’