

# I

‘It is fascinating how unpredictable life can be,’ my father mused on one of our long walks. I loved those Sunday strolls in the cool of late summer afternoons, or in the winter when the snow scrunched under our shoes and snowflakes danced in the breeze and vanished. He had a warm, reassuring voice, and though I was a young adult by then, his way of thinking and the way he looked at the world and his life – detached, as a spectator – still intrigued and charmed me.

I thought of my father’s words as my taxi travelled eastwards on the way to Transylvania. It was December 1990. It had not snowed that year; the fields were dark and bleak, but I still hoped for snow and a white Christmas. Having talked non-stop for an hour, the driver had fallen silent.

A few short hours away was the border of Romania and its province of Transylvania. Not the land of Dracula and vampires, but of mountains and rivers and exquisite birdsong. The land where stories and legends are born. The land of my birth.

Yes, life is unpredictable, and what could have been more unpredictable than the event which had sent me on that journey: the collapse of communism. The eternal and invincible communism. Who would have believed it? Part of me still could not.

‘The ripples of History again,’ my long-dead father whispered in my ear as the featureless scenery slid past the window.

Twenty-five years had passed since we left that part of the world, since our family emigrated – well, most of us did. Twenty-five years since the red and grey roofs of Romania had vanished into milky mist. Moments after, we emerged into blue sky and sunshine. Ahead of us, freedom. And there, above the clouds, I promised myself and the universe: I would never, ever, return.

By the time the plane started its descent to Vienna, I could think only of the future. The heavenly West was only minutes away. The past was irrelevant. And it remained irrelevant for years. Now and then a memory would surface like a bubble in water, but it soon vanished. There was an Iron Curtain between me and my past life.

The years passed. Sometimes at night, when the wind ruffled the leaves of the elm tree in front of our house, I remembered the leaves of the oak trees whispering in the wind in my native land and images of that other life, our life in Romania, would come flooding in. Good times and dreadful times. Etched in my memory, imprinted on my senses. The hills, the grazing sheep, the smell of the pine forest, the trill of the birds were alive again. Suddenly I missed my native land. No, not just the land – I missed much more.

And as I watched the dark fields beyond the window of my taxi, this afternoon in 1990, those memories were with me again and I was transported to the other side of the border, to Romania, and a little flat in a two-storey block in the Southern Carpathian mountains.



It is 1962. My mother Roza is standing at the window, watching the street corner. From that window she will one day spot the postman and his bag where, carefully stacked among the many letters, will be the one we have been waiting for.

Outside the fresh snow sparkles in the sun. White and shiny against the pale blue sky, the peak of Mount Paringu looks over the hills guarding the Jiu Valley. Driven by a northerly breeze, a few clouds are heading our way. A winter silence has settled on the town.

In front of our window, on the strip of land between us and the main street which hardly ever feels the wheels of a car, my eight-year-

old brother Yossi and his friends are playing in the snow.

I am sitting reading a book. The brown tiled stove in the corner of our bedroom has long lost the warmth of yesterday, but Roza has no time to light the fire. She is keeping watch. And as she rearranges the little rounded combs holding her wavy black hair, sunrays escape around her big frame and fall onto the page of my book.

‘Maybe he’s been, maybe I missed him,’ she says, opening the window.

I reach for a blanket.

It is cleaning time. Roza grabs Yossi’s doona, bends over the windowsill and starts flapping it out. Yossi’s warmth from last night’s sleep escapes into the sky. One by one, sheets and doonas wave outside the window, pushing the cold air in. On the table, the pages of Yossi’s book fluff up like the feathers of an angry turkey. It is freezing, but Roza does not feel the cold. She is on the move.

I am trying to read. It is not easy, because Roza is coming and going, like a hungry sparrow looking for food. And my book, *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, is a reflective sort of book; you need silence to enjoy the main character’s ruminations.

Outside, the sun has retreated behind a small grey cloud. In front of the window snowflakes swirl in the breeze. From the distance comes Yossi’s happy laughter. It leaves a smile on Roza’s face.

‘The postman must be late,’ she interrupts again as she piles bedding on the windowsill to air.

What if all those doonas and pillows would roll out onto the street? Nothing ever did, but you never know. Mr Bogdan is on his usual walk at this time of the morning. The image of Mr Bogdan – well known for his slow uptake – hit by a flying doona, trying to disentangle himself, and a panic-stricken Roza running out to save the doona, save the doona, not to calm Mr Bogdan, makes me chuckle. But this is only wishful thinking, because everything is sitting under the wide awning in perfect equilibrium while Roza dusts the room. She moves slowly, her thoughts miles away. She slides a cloth over the radio, then over Yossi’s desk and books. She shifts the cloth to the

Louis XV chest of drawers and the painting hanging above it: a train approaching the viewer, its headlights piercing the dark. Behind the locomotive, the barely distinguishable contours of carriages, like an unending caterpillar, seem to go on forever into the night. Trains, nights, travels, destinations, freedom. And as if Roza can hear my thoughts, 'No, not yet,' she says.

She makes the beds, shuts the window and disappears into the kitchen.

Three more days of holiday, five more months to the baccalaureate. Unless – unless the postman delivers. Unless the passport arrives. Unless we emigrate to Israel. We could get that letter today. But will we? We have been waiting for five years. But today I feel especially hopeful, so I too go to the window to check for the postman. On the main street Mrs Luca, our upstairs neighbour, is walking towards the town centre. Behind her trails an old woman with a bag. No sign of the postman.

From the kitchen, accompanied by clashing pots and pans, comes a tune from *The Merry Widow*. Roza often sings in the background, songs from Kalman and Lehar operettas, the odd Schubert song in German, but at times she sings heart-wrenching Romanian songs of loss and heartbreak, of unfulfilled love, songs which would make most people cry. She sings from the soul, she sings as if she is singing about her own life. Sometimes I join in: 'Why did I leave you behind, why did I leave my home?' But usually she sings light-hearted, frivolous songs, like today. She is experimenting, trying to outdo herself. The high notes climb higher and higher. Suddenly the merry waltz stops. Roza is back, heading to the window. 'He just turned the corner.'

The postman, a tall man in a heavy grey coat, appears from behind the next block, across his chest a shoulder bag bursting with letters. Roza leans out of the window. I stand behind her, all eyes and ears. If our will could make things happen, we would get the letter today.

'*Buna ziua!* (Good day!)' Roza greets him, big smile on her face. The postman looks up, nods and walks past. 'Anything for Leitner?'

'Nothing,' he says, and disappears around the corner. But Roza

is not convinced. Maybe he did not check the names properly. She is sure he did not – didn't he do that the other day? He gave her someone else's letter. Her hopes rekindled, she goes to meet him in the stairway, but the encounter does not prove any more fruitful than those of the last five years. There is no letter, there are no passports – not yet.

And so the wait for the postman was over for that day. It was January and no passports had been distributed since the previous August. But the day before, years after they applied, the Segals got their much-awaited letter: 'Your passports are ready to be collected ...'

There were no private phones in town, but within hours the whole community knew because Mrs Cohen told Mrs Muller who told Mrs Izsak who happened to meet my mother on the street and gave her the news, who told Mrs Steinberg who met Mrs Klein on the way to her husband's office, who told her husband who told Mr Bieber, and so it went.

The speculation started. 'Who is the next lucky one?' My father, Stefan, would not speculate. He had more important preoccupations: his work, his children and what went on in the world. 'Political events control people's lives,' he used to say to us. So that evening, as he did every evening, he sat on the edge of my bed and turned the radio on.

'Good evening, dear listeners,' the Voice of America greeted him in Romanian, and a smile flashed across his face. But barely a few minutes had passed when the Romanian jamming cut in, and the battle between Stefan's resolve to find out what was going on in the world and a government which was just as determined not to let him, started. This was not a fight he could win, so after a while he stopped adjusting and readjusting the dial, moved closer to the radio, glued his ear to the speaker and tried to catch what words he could, what the latest utterances of prime ministers and presidents tens of thousands of miles away might mean for us, behind the Iron Curtain. Khrushchev, Gheorghiu Dej (the Romanian President), names and more names and snatches of speeches escaped through the noise,

which dipped and climbed like a wave. Stefan's face strained with concentration. Good news?

'Nothing relevant to us,' he summarised later at the dinner table, and the conversation turned to passports.

'We're next,' Roza said, as if she had finally worked out how the authorities decided who went and who stayed, who got out and who was condemned to wait. We should be, but will we? There was no way of knowing. What was the logic behind it? I could see none.

'We must be,' she added. But I could hear the Izsaks, the Mullers, the Steinbergs saying exactly the same thing. I could see them sitting at their dinner tables, nodding in unison. Why wouldn't it be them, why would it be us? But deep inside I pleaded with the postman to ring our doorbell in the morning.

Stefan was silent or maybe he was just tired of listening to our guesses and speculations, tired of this game we had been playing for years.

'You are fifty-nine years old,' Roza said. Roza never addressed her husband as 'you'. She used the Hungarian *maga* (*vous* in French), which implies a lack of familiarity with the other person, a slightly inferior status to him. The reason for this went back a long way.

My father's hair might have been greying, but he was as energetic as ever. Roza hoped that he was old enough to be too old for the country. Useful engineers were not allowed to leave. Romania needed them. Socialism was built on heavy industry, and heavy industry needed engineers. It needed Stefan and it needed his friend Steinberg. But Steinberg was in an even worse predicament: he was only forty-eight years old.

Once a week in the evening, chess set beneath his arm, Steinberg dropped in for a game and a chat. Only a short chat; he was a man of few words. Passports or no passports? he speculated. But this was no mere guessing, it was a sharp chess player's analysis in the light of Khrushchev's latest pronouncements and the developments in Soviet-American relations. At times he dared a prediction, which his deep confident voice made seem a certainty. But we knew it wasn't –

when it came to passports nothing was predictable.

Passports always arrived in clusters ... well, nearly always. Two or three passports over a couple of days.

‘There was one yesterday, so there must be at least one more on the way,’ Roza said and gathered the plates.

And I wondered: whose doorbell will the postman ring tomorrow?



While we fretted about the passports, the rest of the town must have been thinking: *The Jews are lucky, they are getting out.* Because only Jews were allowed to emigrate. ‘So they can reunite with their families in Israel,’ the Romanian government declared. Why such magnanimity by a government which had never shown generosity or compassion? No one knew.

They are escaping to the West, must have thought those who could not escape, to where there is plenty of food, where there are no queues, no ID cards, no Securitate (the secret service), where no one has to watch what they say. Where winters are warm. ‘In the West there are medicines which can cure rheumatism, which can cure cerebral palsy,’ someone said to me once. In the West the borders were open, people travelled, had holidays on the Riviera. The West was heaven. A real Romanian heaven.

My father did not believe in heaven. He kept warning us: ‘It will be difficult, the hot climate, a new language.’

‘I won’t miss the hard winters,’ my mother replied, ‘nor these wretched stoves and the filthy coal.’ The language did not worry us. It might take a few months, a year, even two, but then it would be as easy as our mother tongue.

‘Within twenty years there will be an Arab-Israeli war,’ my father warned. It had no effect. Wouldn’t twenty years of life in the West be infinitely better than fifty in Romania?

But it did not look as though we would see the West soon. The Segals’ passports proved to be the last that week. My Romanian baccalaureate seemed inevitable. But there was a small compensation ...

‘If we’re still here,’ my mother said one evening, ‘you will get a

present. A nice new dress made by Mrs Radulescu.'

Mrs Radulescu? The best and most expensive seamstress in town? Now that was a treat.

So one day in the dreamiest of moods I sat in Mrs Radulescu's lounge room leafing through fashion magazines, through pages and pages of slim women with floral dresses gathered at wasp waists. I too wanted to look slim and breathtakingly beautiful. There was such a woman in town and I wanted to look like her.

Afternoon sun streamed through the window, filling the room with cosy contentment. I was halfway through the third magazine when who should walk in? The very owner of the latest exit visa to Israel, Mrs Segal. She must have been approaching her late forties, but her green eyes sparkled, her skin was unblemished. She had come to try on new dresses, her outfits for Israel. Mrs Radulescu took Mrs Segal's new dress off the coathanger and, holding it with the care one would handle a rare piece of art, asked: 'Well?'

'It's beauuuutiful.'

It was made of navy georgette from an old dress which had once belonged to her mother. No such treasure was to be found in the only material shop in town. Mrs Radulescu unbuttoned the top of the dress, slipped it gingerly over Mrs Segal's head, smoothed it over and buttoned it up. Below the waist the waves of georgette flowed lightly and freely, like a field of bluebells wafting in the breeze.

'Another three weeks and I will see my sister again,' Mrs Segal said as she examined herself in the mirror, her hazel eyes shining with joy. Her head leant to one side then to the other, while the great seamstress, pins in her mouth, walked around her, pulled the waist in, re-arranged the shoulders, squatted beside her model and pinned the hem.

'It's perfect!' she said finally and pulled herself up.

The next dress was a yellow cotton with black polka dots.

Distracted by Mrs Segal's dresses, I was no closer to a decision but I was enjoying the atmosphere, the materials, the patterns, the colours and the dreams of wearing every one of those dresses in Mrs

Radulescu's magazines. But my eyes kept returning to Mrs Segal. She seemed to have fallen in love with each of her four dresses.

The sun had moved to the far end of the lounge. Mrs Segal was ready to go.

'That's half,' she said, handing over some money to Mrs Radulescu. 'The rest, as we discussed, I'll pay when I pick them up. By then we'll have finished selling our belongings. Anyway, most of them have gone already.' And she put her coat on and headed for the door.

Now I had Mrs Radulescu all to myself. Having weighed my choices, she decided that the A-line might look better on me, but said, 'Let's see the material first.' For that I needed my mother. Besides, it was getting late.

Outside, the smell of coke was blowing from the mines. On the main street, three barely lit shops. The bus, a rare occurrence in our town, was nowhere to be seen. The road was quiet. A few people were going about their business. A horse pulling a sleigh went past. It headed for the hills, the hills where our milk woman, Maria, lived and wolves howled at night.

Opposite, Mrs Muller had just turned the corner into the narrow street that led to her home. The Mullers would surely get their passports ahead of us, but what would Mr Muller do in Israel? He was a cobbler. He made saddles and mountain shoes for the peasants from all around the Jiu Valley. The shoes in the shop had soles like concrete; you wore your foot out before you broke the shoes in. So Mr Muller had no competition. But neither did he make much money. The Romanian peasant was poor, he barely had enough to eat.

The sun had retreated behind the hills. My breath was condensing. Mrs Radulescu's place had been warm and cosy. Our home was never as warm as hers – my parents were not skilled in the art of living. Mrs Radulescu was a real life-artist, she ran a sizable business. Unofficially, of course.

Not everybody was a life-artist; most people had barely enough to make ends meet. But somehow everybody seemed to manage.

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The snow nearly melted, then it froze hard again. Bits of coal blown from the mines turned the ice grey. It matched the sky, overcast with thick clouds.

It was market day and my mother was out shopping. I was home preparing for exams. The Romanian Insurrection against the German troops in Romania was not able to focus my concentration, so I was relieved to hear the knock on the door.

It was Benny. Benny and I had been friends for years. We lived at opposite ends of the town, but we were in the same class at school. He wore glasses and smiled often. He smiled when a situation was funny, he smiled when it was hopeless. He smiled from embarrassment and he smiled when he was pleased, but even when he did not smile, the corners of his lips pointed upward a little more than most people's. One thing is sure, Benny will not die with a disappointed look on his face.

Benny's family, the Izsaks, lived in a tiny flat at the end of a dingy dark alley. Occasionally they invited me to Friday night dinner. The table was beautifully set, the *Shabbat* candles lit. Mrs Izsak, dark eyes shining with contentment and goodwill, greeted me as a much loved member of the family. She asked about my mother, she asked about me. Soon we gathered around the table. Mrs Izsak covered her hair with a lacy headscarf, her eyes with her hands, and started saying the Friday night prayer: '*Baruch ata ...*' and she thanked God for everything. The live-in helper brought in the chicken soup and the boiled meat and vegetables. Mr Izsak filled the glasses with red wine and said a blessing. By the time the dinner was over, Mr Izsak's face was even rounder, the pink in his cheeks nearly as red as the wine. The steaming chicken soup, the glass of wine, Mrs Izsak's beautiful smile, her softly spoken words, the *Shabbat* candles, all filled the small room with contentment and serenity.

It was night by the time I left the Izsaks. I felt blissful and tranquil, as if some of this family's contentment had been transferred to me. Did such peace spring from being religious, or from a good family

life? Was it due to Mrs Izsak's calm personality, which was so unlike my mother's, or from never having to worry about money? I loved being there.

Yes, the Izsaks had a good life and perhaps Mrs Izsak should have been thankful to Mr Izsak for being so resourceful, for being such an accomplished life-artist. A quiet man, Mr Izsak was a signwriter and made picture frames for the officials. But he also framed pictures for his neighbours, the people who lived in the next street or further afield. Unofficially, of course.

Benny often came to visit. That day he had news. 'Mr Segal was summoned by the Militia. Their passports have been cancelled. Nobody knows why.' And Benny smiled, the smile he hid behind every time a situation looked hopeless. Mrs Segal and her dresses were stuck in town in an empty flat for an indefinite time. Suddenly not only the authorities, but the whole world, even the air we breathed, seemed deceitful.

Our own departure moved into the distant future yet again. Benny was more optimistic, but he too thought that we would be stuck in the country for quite a while, we would have to do the baccalaureate in Romania and he was off to study. And I? I would have to focus on the Romanian Insurrection. It was painfully boring and my mind kept closing to it like a tickled clam. Then there was the history of the class struggle in Romania, its poetical representation in literature, the theory of surplus value in Political Economy. I could not escape them.

Back from the market, my mother looked dispirited. She had heard the news. 'At least we have our furniture, and Stefan has a job,' she said as she unpacked her bag.

The games the authorities were playing with us had plumbed new depths and these, coupled with that boring Romanian Insurrection, felt like soul poisoning.



The snow was gone from the streets and the hills, but Mount Paringu still shone white in the early spring sun. It was Sunday. Women

holding their husbands' arms, children holding their fathers' hands, mothers pushing prams, girls arm in arm on the lookout for friends, filled the main street of Petrosani. All out for a stroll, out to smell the spring and feel the sunshine. And so were we, my father and I.

'Hello!' the Kleins greeted us. The conversation soon changed into German, the Kleins' mother tongue. They were both from Bucovina. '*Khrushchev und Gheorghiu Dej*,' then, '*Kennedy und Khruschev*'. I didn't understand a word, but I knew what it was about: the latest political events and how they would influence our chances of getting out of Romania.

'Who knows if we'll ever get out?' Mr Klein said in Romanian as we parted.

'We will, we will,' my father replied.

We kept walking, me on the lookout for friends, he deep in thought. He stopped to light a cigarette. 'I think the Kleins are expecting too much,' he said as we started walking again, 'I think all these people waiting for passports are expecting too much. Your mother is expecting too much.' He paused. 'Our life in Israel could end up a great disappointment, and then – then what would we dream about? People need dreams.'

My friend Addy walked past with a young woman.



The weeks rolled by. A thick fog of gloom settled on the Jewish community, the two dozen or so religious and secular families sprinkled around the town. Even Roza changed. The songs coming from the kitchen were rarely light and frivolous. She had not seen her sister Ella since 1946. 'I can still see her standing on the platform,' Roza said to me. 'She looked so beautiful. She was forty-two years old when she left, she is fifty-eight years old now. My God, she must be grey.'

Everybody's life was on hold. Some people wanted to have children. Should they or shouldn't they? Emigrating with a new baby could be difficult. Maybe it was better to wait, they said, maybe they would start to distribute passports again. The Cohens were getting

old. They had no children. Mr Cohen was not a well man. His days might end before the passport arrived, his wife might have to emigrate alone. And if bad luck struck, he would be buried in Romania with no one left to tend his grave. But the Cohens were religious, and emigrating to the Promised Land was a prophecy which they had to help come true.

Our lives were permanently temporary, and for our family, the bits of transitory life, the wait until the next month or the one after, added up to nearly six years.

But my mother kept waiting for the postman. 'Among those letters must be the one,' she hoped, day after day. She would soon be reunited with her sisters and brother, what remained of her family after the war. It was not as clear what my father hoped for, but he decided that he would abide by the will of the family to give a better future to his children, the two of us at least.

The third child, Tom, the son from his previous marriage to the glamorous Hella, was not living at home any longer. Six years had passed since I had last seen him.

We rarely talked about my half-brother, a young man with a limp and a feeble right hand, but his presence followed us like a shadow.