

Encounter with the Future

by Jarmila K. Sullivan

In a shabby one-room school, a scrawny little boy walked slowly toward the teacher's desk, hoping to delay the inevitable punishment. The teacher stood in front of his desk and in his right hand held a long, thin piece of wood, which made a swish in the air just before it hit its target. He was tapping it softly on his left palm, as if to test its agility. He eyed the boy and said in a cruel, cold voice:

“You are getting two extra whips for walking slow.”

The boy shivered and sped up. As he was taunted, he offered his hand, fingers gathered together like a rose bud, exposing the soft, unprotected tip of his fingers to the cruelty of the wooden whip. He was not sure whether it was harder to withstand the pain or to suppress the tears. Letting the tears appear in front of the teacher meant further punishment.

The teacher was dressed in the latest “hussar” fashion. His trousers were tucked in his boots, which were polished to perfection. His hair, glistening with pomade, looked dark against the white collar that peaked out of his tight jacket. The jacket was held even tighter at the waist with a wide belt, a belt he was not shy to use. Many children had the scars to attest to it. His mustache was twisted upwards at the ends and the boy could see his lips curled in an ugly smile.

“This will help you walk faster,” the teacher hit the boy two times.

“This will help you remember that you are Hungarian and to speak Hungarian instead of local gibberish.” He raised the whip and hit the boy's fingers hard three times.

The boy managed to control his tears, but when he sat on the hard, wooden bench, he could feel that his pants were wet.

The year was 1910, the place was a little village called Myjava, which belonged to the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The punishment for speaking

Slovak was swift and certain. The little boy's name was Jan and he did learn to speak Hungarian, but when Slovakia became part of the newly formed Czechoslovakia in 1918, he vowed never to speak it again.



Jan with his parents and siblings

Sixty years later, Jan sat on another hard, wooden bench. The place was Victoria Station in London. Fear, less ominous but equally imminent, was descending on his bent, tired shoulders.

He had traveled from Czechoslovakia to see his daughter who lived in London. Excited to see her, Jan was one of the first to get off the train. A crowd gathered behind the gate as people waited for their loved ones to appear. A few times, Jan thought that he spotted his daughter but it turned out to be someone else's child. He watched as the people started to thin out.

He found a bench not too far from where his train had arrived, in case his daughter came a bit late. He sat down and checked his pockets again to see if he could find the paper with his daughter's address, which his wife told him to "guard with his life." He gave up figuring out where and how he may have lost it. It was gone.

The big clock in the middle of the station said 7:00 pm, and the crowd from the train was gone. He had to face the possibility that his daughter did not receive the last letter with his arrival time. He knew that, if she had, she would have come.

Jan watched as people hurried toward their destinations. He did not speak English so the voices in the train station were just noise to him. As he pondered what to do, he noticed a tall young man walking towards him. Next to him walked a person who looked like an older version of the teacher that had made him wet his pants sixty years ago. His fingers tingled in memory. He was mesmerized by a vision of so long ago. As he watched the young man walking next to his "old nemesis" Jan felt very alone and could not help feeling a bit of envy at what he assumed was their reunion. When they drew close to his bench, audible despite the hum of the station, he clearly recognized the words, "Are you thirsty papa?" spoken in Hungarian. Jan jumped off his bench and interrupted father and son.

"Please can you help me? My daughter and I missed each other and I don't know how to find a train to get to her." He had not spoken Hungarian in decades and was surprised how much he still remembered. The young man stopped, looked at his father and told him to sit on the bench the stranger had sat just vacated.

"Don't move papa" the young man said to his father, "I don't want to lose you." Then he turned to the stranger and asked, "Where does your daughter live?"

"Ipswich," said Jan, thinking there was no point telling the stranger the whole story about the lost address.

The young man frowned. "That is a long way from London. Are you sure she is not here?"

"I don't know, but I do know how to get to her in Ipswich," Jan said with a tired look.

"All right." The young man realized that the man before him had probably endured the same long train journey across Europe that his own father had made.

“Do you have money for the train to Ipswich?” he asked kindly.

“Yes.” Jan reached into his breast pocket and gave the young man a white envelope with English money.

When they reached the ticket window, the young man counted the money and realized that the stranger was short by a few shillings. He bought Jan the ticket, making up the difference with his own money. Then he put Jan on the train, which stood not far from where he had left his own father. Jan thanked the young man in his best Hungarian and they shook hands.

It was the first time he had willingly shaken hands with a Hungarian, let alone with genuine gratitude. Jan was still waving to the young man from the window of the train when the older man joined his son on the platform. Jan watched them walking away when, suddenly, the older man turned around and hurried toward Jan’s window. Jan could hear his heart pound in what he knew to be an irrational fear but he continued to stand up. The older man handed him a small travel bag through the window.

“My son said you have a long way to go,” he said, as he handed Jan a small parcel. “Take this. My wife always packs too much.”

“Thank you very much,” said Jan. He watched father and son talking and gesticulating as people who have not seen each other for a long time tend to do. He understood. How ironic, he thought, that the language that was literally “beat into him” would help him so many years later.

He let the tears roll freely on his wrinkled cheeks. He closed his eyes as if to bar the painful image of the past out of his memory. He took a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and dried his eyes.

“Today I got food,” he said aloud and opened the bag that the Hungarian had handed him just moments before. “Ah, a salami sandwich, green paprika and small bottle of red wine.” He smiled and bit into the sandwich with gusto.

As the train pulled out of the Victoria train station, night fell on London but Jan felt lightness in his heart, beyond the satisfaction of his stomach. *

The young woman stood by the gate marked “Trains from Dover.” She strained to see her father. Her lips were still smiling as she anticipated greeting her father, but

her eyes started to fill with tears and her heart beat loud in fear. Is he going to be the last off the train, she wondered, more in hope than annoyance. The last passenger had passed her and the train pulled out of the station.

Suddenly, a terrible idea crossed her mind. What if my father fell asleep and the train goes ... where? She ran to the information booth but was reassured by two separate employees that the conductor walks through the train more than once before the train is allowed to leave the station. They told her to speak to the station's police.

"There is no passenger list. miss," said the police officer.

"Can you call the border and see if my father arrived in England?" she pleaded, her voice laden with sobs.

"No miss, there are hundreds of people working at the border. How can I know whom to call? No, there is no central list."

The senior policeman, a former bobby, felt sorry for the distraught young woman.

"Are you sure you have the right date miss?" He asked kindly. "Do you have your father's letter with you?"

She did not, but the idea that she had made a mistake and that it was the wrong day for her father's arrival gave her hope. Sitting on the tube on the way home, it was this hope that kept her from descending into panic.

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Decades passed before I was able to smile at this memory. My father came to London so that he could be there for my twenty-first birthday. Today was my father's birthday. He would have been 105 years old. I moved across the pond to New York City long ago and I still miss him. As I was remembering my worry all those years ago in London, my cell phone rang. It was my daughter. We were planning our mother-daughter lunch, so she called to make sure that I had the right place and time. I put the phone close to my heart and held it tight, still remembering.

After a frantic night, my father and I did connect the next morning. He may have lost my London address, but he was able to find the house where I used to live in Ipswich. He was there with me on that fatal day on August 23, 1968 when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia. Not surprisingly, the place stayed etched in my father's memory. Brian, who still lived in the house and with whom I kept in touch, drove my

father to London. I thanked my friend profusely, but was sad that I could not thank the two kind men who helped my father at the railway station.

“Every time you help a stranger,” my father reassured me, “you will thank them.” I let that guide my life.

What had happened? At the time, trains coming from the “Continent” arrived at a separate part of the train station. At the border, all passengers had to disembark and go through border control and customs inspection, carrying their suitcases. My father went to get a drink of water and found himself at the domestic side of *the train station at Dover, where he had crossed into England*. It did not occur to him that it would matter which train he took as long as the sign said it

was going to London’s Victoria station. By the time the policeman and I checked the domestic side “just in case,” it was 8:00 pm and my father was on his way to Ipswich.



Jan Kocvarova

For my father the episode had a far-reaching consequence. The kindness of complete strangers undermined my father's resentment and erased the old pain he had carried with him from youth. His decision to leave the painful history in the past both healed and liberated him. "Sometimes memory is our enemy," he said to me. "It can teach people not to trust each other. Even worse, seek revenge."

I often wondered, if there were a scale to show how much evil we have learned to avoid from history, as opposed to how much anger and distrust and revenge we carry forward from it, which way would the scale tip?

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I was the first to arrive for the lunch with my daughter. I asked for a table next to the window. One of the best things about New York City is people watching. There is a story inside each person who walks by. Watching strangers makes me feel as if I am in a library full of books in progress.

I could see my daughter walking toward the restaurant. Tall, athletic, she walked with a confidence of a young woman who knew who she was, what she wanted, and was willing to work to achieve it.

"Hello mum, I have something to tell you." That's my daughter. She gets to the point. "I met a boy, a while ago actually, and I really like him". I waited because I knew her well enough to know that she was not finished. "I think he might be a keeper."

"Well," I said non-committal, "I look forward to meeting him."

"You will like him," she said with certainty. "His father is Hungarian. I know that you will have a lot in common."

For a brief moment I thought about getting back the money I paid for her education but I smiled instead and said, "You are right, we were neighbors in Europe." No history. My father would be pleased.



Jarmila K. Sullivan was born Jarmila Kocvarova in Czechoslovakia. A one-year stay in London turned her into a refugee when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, writing a bloody end to the Prague Spring. In London she went from sleeping in a telephone booth at the Victoria railway station to the lights of the fashion runway. She went on to appear in television commercials and movies under the more pronounceable moniker of Anika Pavel. After immigrating to the United States, she transitioned into fundraising where she wrote articles for newspapers celebrating milestones in the fight against cancer. Prior to dedicating her time fully to writing, she worked as the Lifestyle Editor for BOHO Magazine. Jarmila divides her time between New York City and Cape Cod, MA.