

SYNOPSIS

“In Quest of Nirvana” is a vivid portrayal of the struggle for survival in the author’s newly adopted country, the USA, after having been forced to flee from his native Hungary at the end of World War II.

He encounters a political haven, a free Democracy, a society where few restrictions exist, but help is available only to those who help themselves. His total loss of a lifestyle that had been comparable to “Utopia” is the reason for a difficult re-start at the lowest economic levels; a fight against all odds, facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Impoverished and degraded from the highest levels of the social elite, the author nevertheless builds upon a basis of moral strength, courage, perseverance and a lasting incentive to achieve consistently improving conditions. His goals are set high; the means by which to reach them are extremely varied, and demand an unrelenting personal drive to overcome a constant series of serious challenges.

A life-story that can only be described as fascinating. It consists of a succession of events, arrestingly told, with emphasis on the many quirks of fate rather than on the individual. A vivid presentation of a human life-span made even more realistic by numerous visual examples of important moments of the past fifty years.

This autobiography tells a true story, all the more compelling, because although every detail is real, it unfolds in the style of a novel. The reader can’t help but be carried along with the ups and downs of a fate rich in unusual experiences and humorous anecdotes.

To share in this review of a half-century is rewarding to those who value a summary of significant technological developments as well as taking part in a very special saga of personal evolution.

The author’s childhood in Hungary and years of hardship as a refugee in Austria had been described in the predecessor of this work entitled: *VISIONS OF UTOPIA*. (László Széchényi, 1991. www.upublish.com)

**IN QUEST
OF
NIRVANA**

BY

LÁSZLÓ SZÉCHÉNYI

A SEQUEL TO "VISIONS OF UTOPIA"
by László Széchényi, 1991

In Quest of Nirvana

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DEFINITIONS:

(Merriam Webster's Deluxe Dictionary, 1998)

QUEST:

“Search, Pursuit.....”

NIRVANA:

“A place or state of oblivion to care, pain, or external reality:

BLISS, HEAVEN.

A goal hoped for but apparently unattainable:

DREAM.“

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a well-known fact, albeit painful to the author, that a good book cannot be written by one person alone!

I want to express my most sincere and heartfelt gratitude to those who gave so graciously of their time, knowledge and experience to make this book readable and, hopefully, enjoyable to those who will read it.

This book as well as my earlier books could not have seen daylight without the patience, endurance, stamina and devotion of the person I was most fortunate to share my life with: my wife, Teresa. Her ability to analyze language, structure, context, and relevance saved me from many a pitfall. A guiding light can never be remunerated, only followed in awe.

It is a rare fortune to have family members who possess not only the ability, but the willingness and loyalty to volunteer their contribution to an effort that, obviously, means a great deal to the author, although it may mean less to the editor! My son, Nicholas, provided much needed perspective from the younger generation's point of view. Without that, I ran the danger of being classified as "the old fuddy-duddy" who looks at things through eyes and perceptions long passé.

Last but not least, it takes a native to really know a language. English was my fourth acquired language in the course of my youth; Hungarian, German and French having been its predecessors. I'm eternally grateful to my brother-in-law, Richard C. Vanderburgh, for his invaluable assistance in making my sentences conform to the accepted form and correct structure of this wonderful language.

Two words should say it all, although not nearly adequately: THANK YOU!

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SUNRISE

*Oh, you lovely splendid autumn
with such a sudden, painful blow
destroyed by the cruel winter's
paralyzing ice and snow.*

*And the sunny daylight's triumph
over night and twilight's glow,
again destroyed by frightful darkness,
causing mournful tears to flow.*

*How long... how long
does a bond between hearts last?
Does it die from winter's harshness
or survive the deadly blast?*

*Like the rose that died in autumn
budding life in spring will grow...
forget the winter's pain and sorrow...
rejoice in the new day's glow!*

PROLOGUE

The sun rose like a big red balloon as it emerged from the sea and sent its first rays through the heavy mist hanging over the ocean. We had an earlier than usual breakfast, as it had been broadcast that we would weigh anchor soon after daybreak, to use the high tide that had come in during the night. Everyone crowded up on deck to observe this moment. The squeaking rumble of the anchor chains lasted for quite a while, until they finally lifted the anchors into their sockets with a heavy bang, ringing in the start of that fateful day, July 29, 1949.

The deep bellow of the ship's horn announced that we were on our way, and I could feel the engines shudder as they strained against the force of the murky water below. I looked back towards the East. The sun announced a new day, but to me, it said much more than that. My entire past, my childhood was left behind, beyond the horizon, on the other side of the world. I could no longer see it, it would never be visible again, but I felt it still, and would always feel it in the depth of my soul. The rising sun was a symbol, clearly saying that out of that distant past, a new beginning had to rise. Just as the sun started its climb up the horizon, I would have to look at the road ahead and climb, start climbing towards new goals, towards the apex of my hopes and desires. A new day, a new life.

And the ship moved ahead slowly, long, loud blasts of its horn warning the smaller boats in the harbor of our lumbering approach. A light fog hovered above the water, shrouding the harbor in a mysterious blanket of salty gray. As we got closer to shore, I suddenly saw the outlines of a tall, green, figure emerging from the early morning mist; its crowned head illuminated by the first golden rays of the sun, and the torch which it held with an outstretched right arm, reaching towards the sky with a shining glow.

My heavy sailor friend came up behind me and put his arms around my shoulders. We stood there quietly, immersed in the serene beauty of the scene slowly unfolding before our eyes. I felt a curious mixture of sadness, relief, and anxiety. A sad, heavy-hearted void in my chest for the loss of everything I had left behind. A relieving sense of gratitude for having reached a stage in life where there would be no more hunger, no more bombs, no more machine guns, no more running, and no more violent death.

Utopia? But I couldn't quite deny a deep-seated fear of the unknown, as we approached the gateway to a new country, a new beginning, a future full of questions and uncertainty.

The sailor gave me a stern look, squeezed my shoulders and said:

“Cheer up my friend, you're looking at the STATUE OF LIBERTY, the symbol of FREEDOM... HOPE... and PROMISE... in America!”

CHAPTER ONE

A NEW WORLD

America... the land of our dreams. Never would I have thought that this moment would arrive in my life on that day when I was forced to leave my native Hungary five long years ago in 1944, when, pursued by the advancing Soviet Red Army, I had to leave behind everything I ever cherished, an unimaginably happy and beautiful childhood, a lifestyle that doesn't exist anymore, indeed, an era in history that I could think of only as UTOPIA. And here I was, arriving in a new, strange land; afraid of an uncertain future, but hoping that maybe, just maybe, it could turn out to be something like another utopia!

The entire family was lined up along the ship's railing absorbing the unforgettable magic of the mysterious skyline of New York, slowly emerging from the early morning fog of July 29, 1949. Skyscrapers, truly reaching for the sky, a bewildering potpourri of very high and much lower buildings and a long row of huge docks reaching into the water along the shore. Boats, ships of varying size cluttering the harbor and the body of water in front of us, reaching far into the misty distance toward the North. We didn't know then that it was the mighty Hudson river, meeting the wide expanse of New York harbor.

Our family had been the largest aboard the *USS General Muir*, an Army troop transport under the sponsorship of the IRO (International Refugee Organization) that brought us, along with several thousand other East European refugees, from Bremerhaven in Northern Germany across the Atlantic to New York. We were somewhat of a celebrity during those 10 days aboard ship, because our family consisted of 9 members! We were even written up in the ship's paper. The family was proudly headed by Grandmother Krista Széchényi, (Say-chainey) 75, her son, my father Francis, 48, mother Maria, 47, older brother Ferko (Furcoh), 23, sister Lia (Leeah), 21, myself Laszlo, abbreviated to Laci (Lotsy), 18, two little sisters Susie, 11, and Barbara, 9, and little brother Matthew called Matyi (Mutchie,) 5. My oldest sister Etti (Ettee,) 24, wasn't with us, because having recently given birth to a baby son in Austria she, her husband Tommy Zichy

(Zeechee) and little Andrew were flown to America by a military transport plane.

And so we watched, curiously but also somewhat apprehensively as the bulky ship was slowly turned into the wide berth along -- as we later learned -- US Lines' Pier 59 on Manhattan's West side. The familiar voice of the dashing, young French Escort Officer came on over the ship's PA system one last time, telling us in what order we should leave the ship and saying good-bye to his "wards," all of whom had befriended him although - admittedly, - some more than others! I spied a few hidden tears rolling down the cheeks of certain young ladies in the crowd. The eternal pain of hopeless love and separation!

The long steel gangplank was extended through the big open door in the ship's side and landed with a bang on the concrete dock. The slow descent down that gangway started with the first family lined up inside the ship. The Escort Officer stood there in the doorway pumping hands and hugging an occasional child or moist-eyed member of the opposite gender. At long last it was our turn. We grabbed our small hand luggage, each clutching his own minute possessions, Ferko and I loaded down with extra pieces belonging to grandmother and mother, and followed them down across that last narrow strip of water that separated us from our last link with the past and on to the "New World."

A steady but loud humming noise settled all over the huge pier as the voices of thousands of people, all chatting away excitedly in a multitude of languages, echoed from the tall, ribbed ceiling. We were herded around a big sign bearing the letter "S" to join all those whose name also began with an S. The alphabetical arrangement supposedly made it somewhat less confusing for the many customs officials to check our papers. To my amazement, I was observing - wide eyed I'm sure, - how huge cranes began lifting large nets filled with heavy luggage out of the ship's hold and then dumping them unceremoniously into big piles on the dock. I knew that eventually it would be our job (Ferko's and mine) to go there and find our family's belongings. We didn't have very many, but still the clothing for so many of us and some of the rescued family heirlooms filled quite a few big cases and wooden crates. Although we had, of course, lost to the Communists practically everything we ever owned in Hungary, grandmother and my parents succeeded in rescuing a few pieces of old silverware, which somehow survived the five years we had spent in Austria as refugees. Ferko and I learned to curse the "mixed blessing" of the silver crates, because they were so ungodly heavy and it was, naturally his job and mine to drag them from Hungary all the way to America!

Customs inspection took quite some time, and we began to suffer from the unbearable heat and humidity that descended upon us like a heavy, wet blanket. It turned out - as we heard later - that this was one of the hottest days of the infamous New York summer. All our clothing was meant for cool weather, much too heavy for this climate. To ease the misery, some very nice Red Cross ladies handed us coffee and Coca Cola and immediately began to teach us the value of American coins. Their names were bewildering... a penny is one cent, a nickel is five, a dime is ten, and a quarter is 25! What a confusing thing, why couldn't they just say five or ten cents? There would, however, be many more confusing things in the next hours, days and months, as we slowly learned the peculiarities of life in this - to us - strange new environment: the "concrete jungle" as New York was so lovingly referred to. But we did appreciate and devour with gusto the dough-nuts the Red Cross ladies also passed out. Those, and Coca Cola we were familiar with, having enjoyed them for the first time through the generosity of American GIs in Austria back in 1945.

While we were waiting, we were met by a tall mustachioed gentleman in an immaculate, light blue-striped suit. Colonel Kovács turned out to be a good friend of our Uncle Charlie who had been living in New York since 1946. Colonel Kovács, an American of Hungarian origin, had connections. He was allowed to enter the pier, while all others had to wait outside a wooden fence. He greeted us warmly and assured us that Uncle Charlie and his wife Aunt Imi (Eemee) were waiting at the exit gate. Finally we were free to go, and after arrangements had been made by Colonel Kovács to have our luggage transported outside, we ran into the open, welcoming arms of Uncle Charlie and Aunt Imi. It was an emotional reunion. Grandmother and our parents hadn't seen them since they parted in Hungary in early 1944. I had seen them only when I was a small child and didn't really remember them. Uncle Charlie was my father's younger brother, and the youngest of Grandmother Krista's four children. Having been the youngest, he was also the undeclared, but obvious, favorite of grandmother! We always smiled about that, because she tended to treat him as a small boy and worshipped the ground he walked on.

Back in Hungary, Uncle Charlie had exposed himself politically against Hitler's Germany, so much so, that when the Nazis occupied the country, they were about to throw him into a concentration camp. But luckily, he escaped just in time. He was driven right through Nazi Germany to Switzerland, hiding with Aunt Imi under a load of empty medicine boxes on the bottom of a Swiss Red Cross truck. The Nazi border guards never dared to

search Swiss trucks and vans, especially not the Red Cross ones. Switzerland was very much respected by the Nazis because, as we suspected, many of them had their money there. Uncle Charlie had been to New York back in the 1930's when he was a director of the Hungarian sugar industry, and visited America on business. He had been invited to join the New York Metropolitan Club at that time, and maintained his membership throughout the subsequent years. This was probably one of the biggest strokes of luck for all of us. It was the members of the Metropolitan Club who immediately sponsored Uncle Charlie's immigration to the US. They obtained all the necessary permits, papers, etc., for him and Aunt Imi to come over from Switzerland. This is how they were allowed to enter the US as early as 1946, when millions of other refugees were still waiting to emigrate from all over Europe. He had kept us alive with CARE packages of food, etc., during the worst times of the famine that raged in Austria after the war. Our fates could have turned out very differently, indeed, had it not been for Uncle Charlie.

With Colonel Kovács' help a row of taxis was organized to carry all of us and our luggage to the address where Uncle Charlie had rented an apartment for us. The famous New York Yellow Taxis were a tremendous new experience for me. I had never ridden in a taxi before and I was fascinated by the taxi meter ticking away, showing the amount of money in Dollars and Cents that were accumulated on our way through the city. Gosh, it seemed like a fortune to me... how could anyone have and pay that much money?

My eyes were glued to everything around us, trying to absorb the bustling, busy city streets, the thousands of cars, the people, buses, lights, advertising signs.... there was no end to the wonders that I couldn't even grasp at that moment. I remember distinctly that we passed right through Times Square with its millions of theater lights, and soon entered a big park full of trees, green grass and a lake right in the middle of the city! Everything was a miracle, fabulous, I almost regretted it when we arrived at 30 East, 71st Street, the mahogany colored canopy leading into an enormous building, and a doorman in fancy uniform greeting us and helping to unload everything. We were led to an elevator with polished wooden panels and a shiny brass handle which the elevator man operated. I had never been in an elevator before either! It whisked us quietly up to the 9th floor, where Uncle Charlie opened the door with his own key to a humongous apartment, beautifully furnished, and with so many rooms that it took us seemingly forever, just to learn the layout of the place. It was all like a dream, these sudden incredible riches, the sheer elegance, the immaculate beds with white sheets and soft pillows,

the living room with antique furniture, and the kitchen, fully equipped, where Aunt Imi had a dinner already started for all of us. And best of all, private bath rooms, with real bathtubs, nice smelling soap and fluffy bath-towels.

What a relief, what elation! After that seemingly endless, terrible 25 day journey all the way from our last home, Hohenems, in Western Austria. After one of the happiest family dinners we had enjoyed in many, many years, we fell into bed totally exhausted but feeling in seventh heaven. We didn't think of, neither did we care, what tomorrow would bring. From now on, things could only get better, that was for sure.

Waking up next morning I almost had to pinch myself to realize where I was. This was actually New York, the most fabulous, the greatest city of the world. What joy! The feeling of freedom, of a new life, the hope of no more suffering, no more painful good-byes, no more tears, was almost too much to bear. But again, it was my mother who shook me out of my reverie, always the practical one, always the leader in the family, she soon had us organized into a more or less functional entity. Everyone was given chores to do. Make the beds, get dressed, unpack your things, put things in order, set the table for breakfast, and then help in the kitchen to get the food out. I was flabbergasted by the enormity of the refrigerator in the kitchen; it was well filled with all kinds of appetizing foods, cold milk in big bottles, eggs, butter, bacon, jam, breads, ice cream, and it even made ice cubes! Aunt Imi had filled it, knowing that we wouldn't have any idea of how to get food for the first few days. We went wild over the ice cream... such a delight one could only dream of ... but mother said: NO ICE CREAM for breakfast! I did, however, I must confess, sneak a spoonful or two when she was occupied elsewhere.

And then we made coffee, REAL coffee, with REAL cream and REAL sugar! Things like that had existed only in our wishful minds for years. After the best breakfast I had ever had, or so it seemed, my father gathered us, the older children, into the living room and together with mother, we had a little family conference to discuss what needed to be done next and how we were going to do it. The first thing we had to learn was that in a city like this, one needs to have money for practically every move one makes. Things are usually too far away to walk to, so you have to take a bus or a taxi. We didn't even know about the subway then. We had to find out where things were: The stores where we would find the things we need, food, household items, clothing... everything. We would have to go shopping soon, because we couldn't possibly continue wearing the warm European clothes we had. And food would run out fast, with a family of our size, even

American refrigerators wouldn't be able to store enough for long. Of course, we had no idea how much things would cost, or indeed, where the money would come from. But while we were contemplating all this, Uncle Charlie and Aunt Imi arrived. They immediately joined in the conference, and gave us a great deal of basic advice, without which we would have been completely lost for quite a while.

The telephone and how to use it, was one of the first things to learn. The yellow pages were next. What a wonderful invention; you could find everything you needed just by looking in that book. And then the street map of Manhattan, what a marvelous system! All this presumed, of course, that you could speak English. Now there we weren't exceptionally strong.... we all knew a few words, but to actually speak, that was another matter. Aunt Imi spoke English fluently, but with an extremely heavy Hungarian accent, which even we could hear, and chuckled at in secret. Uncle Charlie on the other hand, like my parents, spoke beautiful King's English, having learned it from English nannies when they were young. But in America, that sounded like a heavy foreign accent too! At least they had no difficulty getting along, because they could read and understand everything... which I could not. It didn't take me long to realize that learning English would be my absolute first priority.

Our oldest sister Etti arrived with her husband Tommy and baby son Andrew a few days later. They flew over from Munich in a big military transport plane, but were still quite shook up by the experience of the sudden departure from Europe, their first long flight in an airplane and the sudden arrival in a completely new, strange world. They were just as glad that it was all over as we had been when our ship docked in New York. We met them at Pennsylvania Station to where they were transported by the IRO from New York's Idlewild Airport. It was a very emotional moment when the entire family was finally united again in the 71st street apartment.

Since I was in my 18th year then, by all rights I should have gone to college that fall. But there was no hope of doing that. Uncle Charlie had given us some insight as to how much money it would take to support ourselves. We didn't have a single penny to our names in those first weeks. He kindly gave us some money to start with, and he had pre-paid the rent for the apartment for a few months. But it was clear that those of us who were old enough would have to find jobs immediately. That was no news to me, I had held five different jobs in Austria since I was 13. I had started as a lumberjack in the mountains, then I had been the electric meter-reader for the village we lived in, and moved on from that

to operate a huge turret-lathe in a Ford factory in Salzburg. When we had to move to a different part of Austria, I went to work in the Kaestle ski factory, a name that later became very famous in Europe. I had also been a stable-boy and hauled logs from the mountains with the horses that were in my charge. So I was no stranger to work, the question was, however, what kind of job I could perform in New York, without speaking English.

During the first few days I accompanied my mother to the food stores to shop for the family. I'll never forget the absolute wonderment and awe that struck me when I entered my first A & P supermarket. The abundance, the variety, the quality and the overwhelming riches which filled that food store were almost too much to grasp. We marveled at the shopping carts (how practical!) and then we were amazed by the check-out person who packed everything in real paper bags for us. What luxury.... what waste! And then we took the bags in our arms and walked back to the apartment. But we didn't realize how far that would be... the city blocks became longer and longer as the weight of those bags almost tore our arms out. We finally made it to the building we lived in, where the elegant, uniformed doorman looked at us with utter amazement.... and disgust! He had never seen any of the people who lived at that address (the corner of Madison Avenue and 71st street!) arrive on foot, exhausted, covered with perspiration, and loaded down with paper bags of food in their arms! That was embarrassing to him. He told us to put everything down, and he would send it up by the service elevator in the back of the apartment. So we learned that not taking a taxi in that part of town was not exactly the right thing to do. We didn't care much about pretenses then, but it was obvious that we shouldn't embarrass the poor doorman this way. Next time we did catch a taxi on the way back from the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company.

The first day after our arrival I had discovered a radio in the apartment -- to my greatest joy -- and soon started to scan the airwaves for whatever music I could find. American music of the day, particularly the Big Bands had become my greatest passion already back in Austria where I listened to the American Forces' Radio Network's station in Munich, every minute of the day and night when I was able to. I was very familiar with all the big names, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, Count Basie, Harry James, and so on. Their music drove me absolutely wild. My very musical ears gave me the greatest joy by listening to the wonderful variety of harmony that those big bands were so good at projecting. And the many different musical arrangements between the various instrumental sections of those great orchestras combined with the hard driving rhythm

supported by the drums, gave me endless thrills. Soon I discovered a station which became my favorite for many years to come: WNEW in New York, the station that in those days, played a maximum amount of good music with a minimum of advertising interruption. I became absolutely crazy about their "Make-believe Ballroom," a program that featured nothing but the best in big-band dance music. To this day, their old theme song: "It's make-believe ballroom time, a time for sweet romance, here is your make-believe ballroom, come-on children.... let's dance!" remains one of my dearest, all time favorites. The music of your teen-age years stays with you forever.

It wasn't long before Colonel Kovács, who was also the General Manager of the Great Northern Hotel in New York, told Uncle Charlie that he might have a job for me in the hotel, if I'm interested. Was I interested? I couldn't wait till the next day when I was told to appear at the hotel for an interview! I was shaking in my shoes as I entered the hotel lobby, dead scared that I would make an absolute fool out of myself, because of my inability to speak English. As it turned out, I was ushered up to Colonel Kovács' office, where he welcomed me with a big grin, a firm handshake, and started to talk to me in Hungarian, which he knew quite well, although he had been born in the U.S. I was tremendously relieved when he told me that the job he had in mind for me, didn't require the knowledge of English at all, as a matter of fact, it didn't require the ability to speak at all! What could that be? He soon explained to me that in a large hotel like that, the biggest danger was fire. One had to be alert to the possibility of a fire all the time, and for this reason, the hotel had a fire-watchman on duty 24 hours a day. During the day it was less difficult, because people such as maids, maintenance men, etc. were always working on most floors. But during the night when everyone was asleep, it was especially important to keep a constant watchful eye everywhere. I was to become a night-watchman, with the job of walking the entire length of every floor (there were 12 of them) every two hours.

Then he introduced me to the "supervisor" of employees; a burly, dark-haired man who turned out to be of Italian origin and spoke only a little bit more English than I did! Angelo, my boss from that moment on, took me on a tour of the hotel floors, showed me a black box I had to hang around my neck by a leather strap and a key which dangled from the box on a string. The black box contained a paper roll and some mysterious mechanism that would punch a hole into the paper next to the pre-printed time, whenever one would enter the key into the fire-box situated strategically at both ends of every floor. Thus the idea was, according to Angelo: You walk floor, stick key in box, make hole

in paper, walk other end, stick key in box, make hole, walk next floor down, make hole, make hole, and next, and next, twelve to one, every 2 hour.... capice? Yes, I could handle this! It didn't take me too long to figure out that the hotel's management wanted to make sure that I did, indeed, walk the entire length of every floor, every time, and at the prescribed time, before they would pay me! Angelo also said: If fire, no yell, brake-a da fire box glass.... siren go weeee,.... weeeee,.... firemen come.... capice?

And so I became a professional night watchman. The hours were ten p.m. to six a.m. I had never worked at night before and wondered how I could adjust to sleeping in the daytime. At first it was difficult, but I soon learned to sleep from 7 a.m. to about 3 p.m. and enjoy the late afternoon and evening at home before going back to work. I'll never forget the first pay envelope I received from the Great Northern Hotel. It was a wonderful feeling. My own achievement. Even if it wasn't a huge amount of money, it allowed me the luxurious feeling of actually having some money of my own in my pocket, and it made me proud that I was able to contribute to the ever empty family purse.

My father had been in poor health and since he knew only how to manage a large estate in Hungary, it was practically impossible for him to get a job in New York. He spent many hours with Uncle Charlie and grandmother, trying to establish a future for the family in America. Several ideas had come up. Management of a large private forested property in Vermont, or running a citrus farm in Florida were the two major ones. He traveled there personally to check them out, but they did not pan out. One thing was certain, we could not stay in New York city. First, it was too expensive, and then the climate would have affected the fragile health of grandmother and that of my father as well, very badly. They couldn't stand the heat and the humidity.

In the mean time I learned how to get around in the city very quickly. I took the Madison avenue bus every day (10 cents a ride in those days!) to go downtown to 57th street, and then walked West across town to where the Great Northern Hotel was situated between sixth and seventh avenues. I got off the bus in front of a large building on the corner of Madison Avenue and 57th Street. It had big glass display windows on both sides of the corner. Inside were several differently shaped gray boxes that looked like machines of some kind, but I didn't know what they were. I distinctly remember the large polished brass letters above the windows spelling out the name: "International Business Machines". I had no idea what that meant and certainly didn't think that those three little words would some day mean very much to me indeed. Later, when I could read a bit more English, I

looked at the displays in those windows and stared at words such as: “Key Punch, Sorter, Collator, and Accounting Machine”. I did not understand what they meant.

I passed many elegant stores with their flashy display windows on 57th Street. Sometimes, to add some variety, I walked across on 56th street just to smell the enticing aromas emanating from the various restaurants of different nationalities. I marveled at their funny sounding names such as: “Sukiyaki Miyako” or “Luigi’s Lasagna”. New York was a truly fantastic place. I quickly felt at home at the Great Northern. This was in no small way due to a wonderful woman who worked as a cook in the kitchens. I was very pleasantly surprised when she first appeared unobtrusively, out of nowhere, while I was in the night-watchman’s room, waiting for my next tour of floors. She stuck her head in the half-open door and said in perfect Hungarian: “I heard you joined us, congratulations and welcome!. You must be hungry.... I brought you a little something to nibble on during the night...” and then she deposited a paper bag on my desk, filled with succulent cold cuts, bread, pickles and an orange! Mrs. Kricsfalussy became a very good friend of mine for many years to come. Her culinary contributions to my nightly vigil made the whole thing much more endurable. It turned out that she had a son, my age, whom she had sent to work in the rich hotels on Miami Beach. She told me how much money he was making, and advised me strongly to go there myself. I should have listened to her.

Mrs. Kricsfalussy lent me a small radio and told me to listen to it all night long whenever I was waiting in my watch-room. I was delighted, of course, but she added: “and don’t waste your time listening to nothing but that jazz all the time! Listen to people talking... you will learn English by doing that. You must learn English, the faster the better!” How right she was! I followed her advice and spent every moment I could reading, listening to, or deciphering words, signs, anything in English. It certainly helped. The little English I knew by then had come from my listening to AFN Munich-Stuttgart, the military radio station back in Austria. So here I continued my education over the airwaves, sneaking in a few big band tunes every now and then, just to break the monotony. I learned and understood the words of one of the most popular songs of the moment because they seemed to fit my life perfectly. Frankie Lane’s “Lucky Old Sun” said: “Up in the morning, out on a job, work like a devil for my pay, while that lucky old sun got nothing to do, but roll around heaven all day.”

Our social life began to pick up a little as Uncle Charlie introduced us to some of his friends in New York. There were

Hungarians, of course, and we enjoyed commiserating with them about the God-awful past we all lived through. But there were some American families too, who invited us not only to their impressive apartments on New York's 5th or Park Avenues, but to their homes in the country too. One of those families had a gorgeous big house in Scarsdale to which they drove us in a brand new Cadillac. I almost melted of pure joy in that luxurious car! They had a daughter of my age, Caroline, with whom I had carried on a "pen-pal" relationship from Austria. It was fun to meet in person after all those letters from a stranger. I was proud that I could talk to her in my broken, but improving English, and she was very encouraging. I was afraid that her obviously very rich parents would look down on me when they found out the job I had, but on the contrary, they praised me very much and told me to always try to learn enough to get an even better job!

One of our most notable social visits was to our distant relative, Aunt Gladys Vanderbilt Széchényi. Grandmother Krista knew her well, as Aunt Gladys and her husband, former Minister of Hungary to the United States, Count Laszlo Széchényi owned an estate in northern Hungary and they had spent considerable time there before the war. My parents had met her in Hungary as well. Unfortunately the Minister died at a rather early age, but Aunt Gladys continued to live with her five daughters in their house in Washington, DC, which had served as Hungarian Embassy during her husband's assignment. She also maintained residences in New York City and at the Breakers, an immense summer house of the Vanderbilt family in Newport, RI. We were all invited to tea at the 5th Avenue apartment and put on our very best clothes and our very best behavior for that occasion. It was an impressive, if somewhat awe inspiring visit. We children, felt a bit uncomfortable in those glittering surroundings, having spent the last five years in much less pretentious circumstances. I felt out of place, especially at that time, in my position as night-watchman.

Our apprehensions dissolved, however, very quickly when Aunt Gladys welcomed us all very warmly and in perfect -- if somewhat English sounding -- Hungarian! She had a nice word for each of us and my respect for her grew by the minute while we all did our best to sit properly, not spill the tea, not act clumsily or worse, and speak politely, only if spoken to. I got a little hot under the collar when she asked me outright what I was doing in New York, but again, I realized that I needn't be inhibited with her, because she nodded approvingly when I explained that I was working in the Great Northern Hotel. Aunt Gladys became a benefactor of our family from that day on; she never neglected to send us a very welcome gift in support of the family's Christmas expenses.

The luxury of money soon became very evident to us. Without it, one would always be disadvantaged. With it, even a little of it, one would be able to enjoy the good things in life. A good example was the immense pride I felt when I invited my brother Ferko and sister Lia to join me in a movie one evening. American movies and movie stars impressed us to no end, and the New York movie houses were the utmost in luxury and comfort. The sheer size of the “Loew’s 72nd Street” left us almost breathless; the little electric stars blinking in the dark blue, domed ceiling, and best of all... while it was a sweltering 90 degrees outside, in there we could recover and feel human again in that heavenly Air Conditioning! And one could munch on pop-corn or chocolates and even smoke cigarettes upstairs on the balcony, if one wanted to. Sheer delight, the fruits of one’s labor. Smoking was a habit I had picked up, unfortunately, in my early teens in Austria copying my young friends of that time. Everyone knew that “it was bad for you” but we delighted in it just the same. I was overjoyed when I found out how little money a pack of my favorite “Philip Morris” cigarettes cost in New York in those days. So was my father who had suffered a great deal from his heavy smoking habit during the years of forced abstinence when cigarettes were non-existent in post-war Austria. He always chuckled at the ad: “I’d walk a mile for a Camel” and said that he would gladly walk five!

Entertainment was affordable in New York in those days. I was amazed when I found out that it would only cost one Dollar to see the famous “Rockettes” and a movie at the Radio City Music Hall. We were awed by those shows, the glitter of the impressive hall, the music, the dance, the fabulous organ that emerged from the wall and the organist who enchanted us with a fascinating performance. Never before had we experienced anything like it. I had seen some Hollywood movies showing orchestras that played excellent music, but I had never seen such a great orchestra in a live performance before. To make things even more “festive” we went to have dinner at the Rexall Drugstore, just across the street from Radio City Music Hall. Dinner consisted of our newly discovered favorite delight: a Banana Split! It was superb entertainment to watch them prepare it. The dish was shaped like a small boat standing on one leg. In went first a banana split in half, then came three large scoops of ice cream; vanilla, strawberry and chocolate. All this was covered with a generous, thick layer of walnut chunks. To hold it all down they gave it a heavy coating of corn syrup, followed by a fancy layer of whipped cream that was squeezed out of the container in a beautiful ribbed pattern. And then the crown of this superb creation was applied to the top, a thick, juicy maraschino cherry with its stem reaching for the sky.

We were starved by the time they placed the result of all this labor on the counter in front of us. To help wash it all down, we ordered a large Coca Cola with lots of ice and a long straw to allow us to sip it out of the tall glass. Absolute bliss. No one cared about calories, cholesterol, fat or boring things like that in those days!

One day I saw an advertisement in the paper that announced the forthcoming appearance in New York of one of my very favorite big bands: Benny Goodman would play at the Roxy Theater between movie performances. Nothing in the world could have held me back from going to see and hear that show! There was open seating in the Roxy, so that I could move right into the first row as soon as the movie was over. It turned out to be one of the highlights of my life of 18 years to be that close to a band that I've been listening to with great admiration ever since American music first appeared on radio in Europe. Benny Goodman was not only a fabulous musician, a virtuoso on the clarinet, but a really impressive showman as well. He was outstanding as a band leader, they followed his every move with the utmost precision and split second timing. I was absolutely delighted, and went back to see him several times.

My English was improving and so Mrs. Kricsfalussy told me one night that I should talk to the Personnel Manager at the hotel about a job that she knew was available. In those days there were no automatic elevators. Each lift had to have an operator, a real live person, who "drove" the elevator from floor to floor with a handle that turned a wheel on the front panel left and right. It also opened and closed the door in one motion. She told me that I should apply for the elevator operator's job, since one of them just got fired! I ran up to the Employment Office the next morning and mustered every bit of my knowledge of English so as not to ruin my chances when asking for that job. I was nervous, and when asked what I wanted I blurted out: "I want to be Lift Boy!" The manager laughed and said: "Well, well, we call it elevator operator, but since you're learning English so well, I guess we can give it a try." This is how I was tried out for this position of extreme importance and prestige, because after all, I was supposed to transport every guest who ever entered the hotel and uphold the good name of the Great Northern as well. And be polite to them on top of that! I looked definitely dashing in my brand new shiny blue, gold buttoned and ribboned uniform with the name "Great Northern Hotel" embroidered in gold letters above my left breast pocket. I felt like a million dollars -- or some fraction of it at least -- when the first guest stepped into my elevator. She was a portly looking lady of impressive measurements who filled the air with a rather sickening aroma of some exotic tropical flower, and answered my resounding "Good

evening Ma'am" with a somewhat unenthusiastic "Buenas Noches". Well, it got better after that. I found out that many guests were looking for a newspaper to read before retiring for the night. So I obtained a stack of them, piled them up in the inside corner of my elevator, and charged at least twice as much for each as it had cost me. Thus the essence of business became evident to me and I learned that profits could be made if one gave people what they wanted, when they wanted it. One of the boys on the day-shift told me a joke about our profession. He said: "You'll never be happy as an elevator man, because our life has its ups and downs, but we always wind up in the same place we started from." I liked that, and so when a passenger returned my greeting by saying: "And how are you?" I always answered: "Well, I have my ups and downs!" I got many laughs at that, and sometimes they would let me keep the change when I sold them a paper.

To summarize our stay in New York during those "beginning times" in America, I can only say that I enjoyed every minute of it. The city had so much to offer, so much to see, so much to hear, to learn, to enjoy. Living in that luxurious apartment together with my family was nothing but a dream. A lifestyle that would have suited us very well, had we been able to continue it. But it really was too expensive for our big family. Even if all of us who were able to, would find jobs, we couldn't hope to earn enough to live in New York. Uncle Charlie was mobilizing all his friends and relatives in order to find a solution for us.

It so happened that one of Uncle Charlie's acquaintances, a lady of Russian aristocratic origin, had married into the Morgan (furniture) family of North Carolina, and lived in Asheville, an attractive small city in the Western mountains of that state. She visited New York often and on one of those occasions suggested to Uncle Charlie that Asheville might be an ideal place for us to settle in. She described it as a most pleasant town, lovely mountains surrounding it, and having a climate that would suit us extremely well. It never got too hot in the summer, or too cold in the winter. It sounded attractive and so father went down there to look around. He liked what he saw, he had met some very friendly, helpful people and was encouraged by everyone to make Asheville the new permanent home of our family.

The decision was soon made. In October of 1949, just over three months after we first set foot on American soil, we packed up once again to move to an unknown, new part of the world. I was excited and looking forward to the journey by train from New York to Asheville. It would be a long ride, almost a full day and night before we would arrive. Our ties to New York were soon severed, Good-byes said to all the new and old friends; I had quit

my job at the hotel after having thanked Colonel Kovács once again for his kindness and understanding. Mrs. Kricsfalussy cried when she hugged me and gave me the last ham sandwiches for the road. Her kindness got to me, of course, how could it not have?.... And I thought there would be no more good-byes in this new life!

All luggage packed, ready to go, we piled into several -- by then familiar -- New York taxis, and drove down through the city to Penn. Station. Uncle Charlie, Aunt Imi and the Kovács' were there to see us off. The Good-byes were not so bad this time, because I knew that I would be back -- for sure --!