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Tea with Graf Gazdag

WHEN MY FATHER WANTED me to get a proper education, he knew that no one on Long Island could offer the right lessons. He took me back to Rose Street, in the heart of Brooklyn. Papa wanted to go back to his old neighbourhood as often as possible, but my mother and I preferred the graces Long Island had to offer. My parents escaped Hungary after World War II, and came to Brooklyn first. They reunited on Rose Street, and according to Mama, except for finding each other again, Rose Street was a harsh memory, not as harsh as the Hungarian-Czech border in 1949, but still rough. My mother had no desire to go back to Rose Street any more than to her wrecked family home in Budapest.

My father was different. After three years in Glen Cove, he kept much of his social life in Brooklyn. The others knew that we Solomoysis made it after we moved to Long Island, but my Papa was never one for being a big shot nor a bragger, but something drew him to Rose Street. Of course, he had friends there, as close to him as my American ones at Glen Cove Middle School.

Papa always reminded me that Rose Street was like a miniature United Nations. Mr. Marino, the Sicilian teacher, lived with his family three buildings down from ours. He had graduated from college, making him the only formally educated man in our old neighbourhood. The folks respected him for that, so we never picked on his skinny son, Tony. Tony hated fun and read twenty-four hours a day. As he promised when he was ten, Tony became a heart surgeon. There were other people too, such as grouchy Mr. Sartis, our bald grocer from Athens, Krauss, the fat Bavarian baker, and a one-eyed Chinese shopkeeper whose name I never knew. I do remember that his eldest daughter, Amy, taught me bridge the summer before we moved away. I had just turned nine.

My father filled his niche in the community as owner of the best men's clothing store in Brooklyn. His front window stunned the other shop proprietors with its elegance. Papa's place always seemed much larger once you stepped inside, yet he crammed it with dark suits, silk ties from Italy, and British and German-made hats.

My father never boasted about being the most successful member of his family, but he was. Of my grandfather's five sons, one died trying to keep the red, white and black swastika flag out of the Motherland, two were killed trying to keep it flying, and my father and his brother, Jan, immigrated to this country. Uncle Jan lived in Chicago and promoted boxers and my father never spoke to him. Both my father and uncle died without telling me what the trouble was, but I always sensed that it had something to do with the money my father used to begin his store. Growing up, I felt that pure Magyar diligence built up his store into the best, *simply the best*. That was the phrase used by some famous lawyer who worked for the Governor of New York. This man bought all his clothing from Papa, sometimes purchasing half a dozen suits at once. "Simply the best, Mr. Solomoysi," the lawyer would mutter as he wrote a cheque. "They cost a fortune, but what else can you charge for the best suits in the country?"

The governor's attorney was not our only celebrity customer. Once an infamous Puerto Rican gangster from Spanish Harlem dropped in with a couple of bodyguards. He spent nearly two hours choosing a hat. One of the bodyguards bought a purple silk handkerchief and ruby cufflinks. The other gave me a small gold crucifix.

When Papa discovered what I received, he became rather annoyed and took it away. Religion brought out the worst kinds of passions back in Hungary, and even as a child I knew what had happened before 1945. My Jewish mother practised very little religion, but she once told me that anyone whose mother was Jewish was always Jewish. She agreed to my baptism only to please my father, who was really an atheist, yet feared hell if "you didn't do things right." Tossing the crucifix into his dresser drawer, he growled, "Their kind, above all, need not save the soul of my son! They'll end up in Sing-Sing when it's all over."

I remember the mobsters and a few other notables, since I worked in the store after school. Papa said I once met Eric LaGuardia,

the mayor's son, but I do not recall him ever in our establishment. In his old age, Papa loved boasting that he sold suits to New York's "Little Flower." Mayor LaGuardia passed away two years before my parents immigrated, but I gladly agreed with Papa.

Our Hungarian customers proved to be our strangest lot of customers, if we could call them customers at all. They visited the store daily, sometimes in groups of four or five. They would stay for hours, laughing and smoking, and never buy a single item. My father spent more time entertaining Karl Uuvari, the leather-worker, than he did with his wealthy bankers, lawyers, politicians and criminals. Uuvari was from my father's neighbourhood back home, so if two landsmen could not take care of each other, who else would? A middle-aged priest named Father Miklos Horvath frequented our shop quite often. I remember being terrified of him. He had a tall, bony stature, like an ivory club swathed in black cloth. His thin face, with its high cheekbones and wide forehead, always looked severe, as if a laugh might fracture it. One time after a visit, I said to Papa that he was Dracula in a collar, and he chased me with an empty box, scolding me in Hungarian. He laughed when he swatted me.

A stoop-shouldered young man would walk by our store and peer in the window through heavy gold-rimmed glasses. He was searching for Father Miklos. When the priest was not there, he would visit us. Imre Horn, the local Stalinist, loathed all clerics. He emigrated from a Romanian border town, and claimed a lot of crazy things about himself. He said that his parents held high university positions before the war, and they named him after a famous Hungarian playwright. My father told me he was being truthful about his past. Horn preached a vicious form of communism, I discovered later in life. As a child, I remembered him bitterly complaining about life in America, and he would scream for relief for poor immigrant neighbourhoods. He lived in a tiny damp apartment on Houston Street, with his wife, Sophia, and their infant son.

Sometimes Horn burst into our store, violently shaking his large head, framed by a red beard and topped by bushy, rust-coloured hair. In a stammering voice, he would read out his latest article before sending it to a communist newspaper. Horn tried in vain to make his living by writing professionally, but the only publications sympathetic to his views had limited circulation, and could not afford to pay anything. On rare occasions, he took jobs to

support his family, but he could not hold one for long. He once worked in Papa's store for a week. He said something nasty to Papa when he heard about our move to Long Island, but Papa took no offence, and later told me that he acted so strangely because his child was dying. His dark-haired, dark-eyed wife became close to Mama. Sophia told her that Imre could never work very hard because of his frequent headaches. Mama would slip her a few apples or oranges, and sometimes money, after Sophia became pregnant again in the spring of 1964.

I remember that season quite clearly, for in the month of June, I officially joined the Hungarian community as Imre Horn left it. My father and I were invited to afternoon tea with Count Gazdag. Papa and his cronies regarded the Count as the chief Magyar in New York. The Count inherited his genuine noble title from his grandfather, the famed Josef Szathmary-Gazdag of Prague, who returned to his homeland and led the vanguard during the Revolution of 1848. All the males of the Gazdag bloodline claimed the title of Count, or the German word, *Graf*. The Hungarians of New York State looked to Graf Andre Gabor Gazdag for leadership, since he represented the authority of the Motherland. This great nobleman—our only royal figure—actually lived in the old Edward Arms Hotel on Fifth Avenue. He often came to Brooklyn to visit his doctor, eat at a delicatessen, or just walk, but he never came to Papa's store. My father never seemed disturbed by this, and said that "royalty from Fifth Avenue should not be expected to buy their clothing on Rose Street."

At the time, I could not appreciate Papa's excitement over taking me to Sunday tea with Graf Gazdag. "So, I'm only twelve, Papa. Will this make me a man?"

"No, of course not. If you had a bar mitzvah, that would make you a man. But you're not thirteen yet, and that's your mother's faith, not our religion."

"Then what about our religion?"

"I'm afraid of religions. Your mother and her people have a wonderful religion, beautiful traditions, and such education, but only bad things happened to them in Europe. We always loved each other, but people tried to kill us to keep us apart. But we still got married, and we survived, and we came here, and by a miracle, probably from God, we found each other again. But religions, I'm not sure about."

"Why do I have to go to this tea?"

"David, this has nothing to do with religion, but this is how you become a real Magyar."

"What is a Magyar?"

"Don't be comedian. Now you're coming with me for a haircut."

My father insisted that I accompany him to Vito's barbershop the day before, but his intensity then seemed dwarfed by his ferociousness that Sunday morning. Our preparations began shortly after breakfast. The Count invited us for three o'clock, but Papa expected me to be ready by noon. After a hasty bath, my mother gave me my ritual torturous hair-combing. Wet, tangled hair had to be straightened out, even if it killed me, and my habitual cowlick required corporal treatment as well.

"David," my mother whispered, "you must look your best for royalty. I won't have the Hungarians thinking that you're a neglected Jewish child."

My Magyar endurance nearly snapped as I got into my navy blue "coffin suit." I called it that the first time Papa showed it to me because it looked so formal that only a dead twelve-year-old would want to wear it. Mama got upset because of what I said, and she immediately countered my reference to coffins with a "God forbid." Mama said that whenever somebody said something that could bring on bad luck. Sometimes, if Papa weren't looking, she would even cross herself like Mrs. Marino.

God, how I hated that suit. The giant gold buttons barely fit into the small buttonholes, and the fabric reeked of camphor. I was also afraid of what Mama and Papa would do to me if I ever got it dirty or torn. The standard white shirt that went with it never appealed to me, either. It was too clean, too white, and the collar choked me. I was forced into that outfit, complete with my polished black dress shoes and Papa's gold tie clasp.

A bus ride later, we arrived at Fifth Avenue, but we had forty minutes to spend before three o'clock. The utter extravagance of the place thrilled me. I never quite forgot the two ladies we saw. The elder of the pair was quite old, yet she sported a mane of rust-red hair. The younger woman had a white fur stole and matching hat, but her outstanding accessory was the small pink poodle she walked at the end of a long silvery leash. When the ladies paused to gaze into a dress-shop window, the tiny cotton candy dog jumped

on Papa, almost reaching his shin. The puppy's elegant mistress apologized in French, and my father smiled. "The *Hund* was after this," Papa whispered, tapping the gift-wrapped box he squeezed under his arm. "He has good taste for a puppy. Marzipan you never feed to dogs, not at these prices."

"But if you are a count, Papa?" I asked knowingly.

"If you're a Magyar count, marzipan is all you should eat. Nobility gets the fancy almond paste, but you—you get all the rock candy in the world." Papa chuckled, and adjusted my lapel with a tug. "Let's head for the hotel now."

We approached the Edward Arms, at that time the best hotel on Fifth Avenue. The grey marble, thirty-story building presided over the street like a palace. The fat doorman, dressed in a commodore's uniform, greeted us in a deep Brooklyn voice. We nodded back. I was awestruck as we edged into the revolving door.

"That man says 'hello' to millions of famous people every day," my father muttered. "He may have tipped his hat to the Queen of England just this morning. Mama told me Greta Garbo stays here all the time. Well, I think that President Roosevelt, may-he-rest-in-peace-and-we-all-live-to-be-a-hundred, yes, he was in this hotel, too." My father and mother made superstition the heart of what little religion they had. Papa always used that "may-he-rest" phrase when referring to the dead, but he said it with a special reverence when he mentioned the late President. He loved FDR, and believed that he was a saviour to America and the rest of the world.

The lobby of the Edward Arms seemed like a world of its own, with its restaurants, galleries and stores. A giant glass case in the middle of the floor caught my attention. In it, a giant ceramic greyhound reclined on a silver fox coat. Smaller cases contained priceless designer jewelry encrusted with sapphires, rubies and diamonds. Others displayed British silver, crystal and gold glassware from Czechoslovakia, and delicate Oriental dinnerware. Groups of older people in formal attire stood around a tall case near the hotel barbershop. When I walked toward them, they moved on, allowing me to see the treasure inside. On a bolt of honey-coloured velvet, three large pink and white seashells were arranged with long strands of pearls.

My father called me over. "Time to see the Graf," then added, noticing my fascination, "we can look around later, if you'd like."

We stepped into the glass and gilded wrought-iron elevator. To my puzzlement, Papa told the elevator man that we wanted to go down to the basement.

"Visitin' the Count?" asked the operator.

"We sure are," answered Papa.

"He sure is havin' a lot of company today. About thirty minutes ago, I took down this funny-looking fellow with red hair and a beard. He was muttering about somethin' the whole ride."

Papa smiled. "I know such a man."

We walked down a dark corridor, and I could not understand why a nobleman would live down here, when he could have had a room upstairs. "Here?" I asked.

"Yes." My father shrugged. "But back home, he always kept a suite at the Hungaria in Budapest. That was the best hotel in Europe."

We stopped at a freshly painted door with a large brass knocker mounted to it, shining and out of place in the basement. Papa knocked, and Father Miklos opened the door. "Welcome, Mr. Solomoysi, welcome." He grinned down at me. "So glad you could bring young David. Please come in."

As we entered, Horn and the Count stopped arguing. Horn glared at us for a second, beef-faced, then grunted a quick greeting. Our host rose from his fat easy chair covered in an antique fabric of pale green, and I got my first real look at Count Andre Gabor Gazdag of Hungary. He only stood about five-foot-seven, barely supporting his potbelly on short legs. Nearly bald, the Count made up for that with a giant snow-white handlebar moustache. Bushy white eyebrows crowned eyes of sky blue. He wore grey trousers, a white shirt, a black wool tie, and a torn sweater of powder blue. He studied me with equal intensity, then patted my head. I offered my hand, which he shook heartily.

"My name is David Solomoysi, sir."

"Very good to meet you, David. I am Graf Gazdag." I noticed that he used the German word "*Graf*" instead of "Count." "Karl Solomoysi, I finally have the pleasure of meeting your fine son."

"The pleasure is ours, Graf Gazdag," responded my father.

"He seems like a fine boy—keep him that way."

"I try, Graf. Children can be so difficult at times, though."

"So true, Solomoysi. Yes, I have my granddaughter to raise. So many of the young grow up to be radicals, you know." The

Count tossed his head toward Horn, who stood in a corner, ignoring men conversing around him and brooding as always. "The crazy things one reads in the papers these days. Just this morning in the *Herald Tribune*, I read that a man in Chicago strangled his own two children because his wife would not divorce him. If he was also a communist, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Neither would I," muttered Papa gravely. "It's sinful. If only Franklin Roosevelt were still alive and still President, God rest his soul, none of these things would happen. Yes, we need him today, and we should live to be a hundred."

"Or what about that wonderful President Kennedy?" suggested Father Miklos. "It is such a shame what happened to him. I'll never understand Americans."

"But for the world's troubles," scoffed the Count, "a great king is still needed. Our late *Kaiser und König*, Franz-Josef of Austria-Hungary—now there was a man who would bring order to our troubled world." His eyes glittered with blue light as he spoke. "No radicals and Bolsheviks screaming about during his holy reign. Ach, Solomoysi, sit down and we will have a little toast to *König* Franz-Josef."

"And perhaps we'll have something to go with it." Papa offered the Count the silver-foil box of marzipan, which he accepted gratefully.

We sat down on an old, faded, rose-coloured sofa, and the Count waddled across the room to a mahogany cabinet, topped by two silver candlesticks. From the cabinet he produced a copper tray, holding an amber crystal decanter and matching cordial glasses. The old man concentrated on keeping the tray steady, but narrowly avoided hitting his low-hanging chandelier. He poured each man a white peppermint schnapps, and looked at me and said, "I have not forgotten you, young man. My granddaughter, Maria-Theresa, is preparing a special snack just for you."

As the men drank to the memory of Franz-Josef, the Count's granddaughter brought in a freshly made chocolate hazelnut torte, my favourite food. While I ate a slice of this devil's food delicacy and washed it down with cold milk, I watched my father's false pleasure at the repeated toasting. Each man chose a famous Hungarian artist, writer or statesman, and they all downed the schnapps. My father hated peppermint schnapps. He eyed my torte jealously, but for the Count, he offered a toast to the composer Rakresh, and

swallowed his sixth liqueur. Horn still had his first glass, and refused to take a sip until the toasting was over.

Maria-Theresa served tea and divided the rest of the cake, chatting with us in a soft, not-too-American voice. She looked like royalty should, with a tall, slender frame, long blonde hair, and green eyes. She had to be at least five years older than myself; the new high school ring gave that much away. Maria-Theresa winked at me, and I responded likewise. I quickly checked to see if her grandfather had noticed. I was in luck; he hadn't.

She disappeared into the kitchen, so I focused my attention toward the group the gentlemen. The conversation about the mayor slowed down to nothing when they noticed I was listening. "David, do you know about your Magyar background?" asked our host suddenly.

I was immediately sorry that I had tried to join the discussion. "Yes, Count Gazdag, but only what my parents and grandmother have told me." As an afterthought I added, "The teachers never say anything about Hungary in school."

"And what have you heard about Hungary?" asked a bespectacled Magyar doctor sitting next to the Count.

I thought hard and fast until an idea dawned on me. "Every Sunday morning I get twenty-five cents allowance." I noticed that Papa smiled sheepishly, but I plodded on. "Before Papa hands me the quarter, I must pick up the picture of Lajos Kossuth from the mantle, and hold it in my *right* hand. As I hold the picture of our greatest patriot, I say, 'Up Hungarians to your feet; the moment is here, it's now or never'."

"*Ach*, but not in Hungarian," exclaimed the Count.

"Yes," I answered. "*Talpra Magyar hi a haza, itt az ido most vogy soha.*"

Papa beamed, the Count sighed with pleasure and the other guests applauded. Father Miklos finished his cup of tea. "You surprise me, David," said the priest. "I had no idea that you spoke Hungarian."

I smiled. "Only those words."

"You know how youngsters are about learning languages," my father growled with mock displeasure. "Can't teach them a thing."

Father Miklos leaned forward. "Herr Solomoysi, I would be more than happy to give young David afternoon tutoring in the Hungarian tongue."

In horror, I visualized losing my happy afternoons of street baseball to long hours of repetitious classes.

Papa's reply was diplomatic. "No thank you, Father, since my son has a lot of schoolwork. He does so well, I hesitate adding to his responsibilities." I should have known that my father would never permit me to take lessons of any kind from a priest. Being Hungarian was our identity, and it did not matter if we were in Europe or in America. We were among landsmen, but having a son half Catholic and half Jewish made religion a sticky issue for my father.

It would take me twenty-five years to figure out who I really was.

"But why should he bother to speak Hungarian at all?" Those words tumbled from the mouth of Imre Horn. "You, Mr. Solomoysi, you want your son to memorize Kossuth. Why? Why do you and your son bother to go through a dumb ritual?"

Papa reflected for a moment, then wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. "I'll thank you not to criticize how I choose to raise my son. If you have chosen to reject your heritage and mother tongue, that is your business."

Horn waved his arms angrily. "Hungary did nothing for us! America is doing nothing for us now! No homeland can—"

"How dare you speak that way," gasped Count Gazdag. "Hungary gave us a wonderful language and culture, and America gave us all a home when we had nothing. Most of us have done well here, but maybe radical thoughts take up so much of your time that you never get the chance to take account of your own failures, yes?"

"Count, you say you've *prospered* here? You lead a congress of foolish old men. You make me ill." The young man fell silent.

Then the *Graf* smiled. "But I'd be most appreciative if you did not get ill on my carpet. May I suggest using the bathroom, Herr Horn—the one down the hall, please." He pointed toward the door. Horn stormed out.

The ensuing minutes of silence seemed endless. Count Gazdag broke the tension. "David, my son, pay no attention to strange men like Herr Horn. They are lost. There is a place for good men everywhere, and it really doesn't matter if they are Christian or Jewish, or good amounts of both. America is a wonderful country for us. Please, never forget that."

"I won't, sir. I promise," I replied. "May I ask you something, Graf Gazdag?"

"Of course, my son. What?"

"If we have no royalty here in America, what does a count do—I mean, for a job?"

My father began to say something, but then just stammered and blushed.

The Count nodded to him, and clapped me on the shoulders. His wise eyes crinkled warmly. "A count here does what he can to make a living. I myself work as the chief janitor in this hotel." He gestured with a stout thumb to the brooms and work clothes in a corner. "I get a room and a salary. It's nice."

He reached for the bottle of peppermint schnapps. "Magyar brothers, let us have a drink to President Roosevelt and President Kennedy, and this new man, Johnson. *Egesz segedre.*"