

ANDRE KOCSIS

The English Tutor

THURSDAY, MARCH 21

Today, after school, I gathered all my poems into the tin box from the Christmas cookies that Refugee Assistance gave us. I hid the box under my jacket, put some kitchen matches in my pocket, and walked to the end of the street, crossing the field where they're building all the new houses. A workman shouted, "Little girl, you can't come in here," but I pretended not to understand. I reached the old orchard with the dead trees, and then took the narrow path which climbs up the bluffs. It was cold but sunny, and the wind stung my face, making my eyes water. As I got a little higher, I could see a good portion of Montreal, with all the cars streaming along the streets and the stone houses where the rich people live. I gathered some sticks and dry weeds as I went. When I reached the little cave, I put these in a pile, and tried to start a fire. The weeds would burn for a second, but then would go out with a puff of smoke, and the sticks wouldn't catch. I was down to my last two matches. I thought I would have to give up, when finally a jolly orange flame pranced along a stick, and soon others joined his dance.

I opened the cookie tin, and, one by one, I fed my poems into the flames. Each sheet would flare up, lighting the walls of the cave, and then become delicate grey ash.

I resolved that I would only write in English from now on. Papa says we will never go home again, and must become Canadian. I keep wondering what Jutka is doing, and whether she has found a new best friend.

Being in a new country is difficult. I missed four months of school, plus I don't understand what the teachers say. In math and science I am ahead, but when the rest of the class does literature and composition, they send me down to Grade One. It's embarrassing. The kids are three years younger, except for Zoli, who came on the same ship as we did. Last week

Zoli got sent to the principal for hitting one of the little boys because he was making fun of us.

March 21, 1957

I often wonder that, as the flame of my love blazes with such ferocity, my gaze does not scorch its object. It seems however that this inferno consumes only me, hollowing out my core, leaving nothing but a husk, its incandescence, by some trick of optics, failing to penetrate the window of my eyes, incapable of throwing its searing rays outward.

When Laszlo looks on me, does he see only a devoted assistant?

Today he was dictating a letter to a supplier in Scotland. I pulled my chair next to his desk, because he tends to speak softly, and I inhaled the scent of cologne and tobacco that I have come to associate with him. A shaft of sunlight from the windows at his back gave him the appearance of one of the saints in the paintings at Notre Dame. The office was quiet; it seemed that Laszlo and I were ensconced in a timeless cocoon of intimacy. And then the shrill jangle of the phone broke the spell.

It was his wife. I handed him the receiver, and after he hung up, he asked me to go to the bank and withdraw some cash.

Laszlo knows only too well that we'll have trouble paying our suppliers on time this month. Yet, without hesitation, he exacerbates our business problems merely to indulge his do-nothing wife in another one of her extravagances. Surely he must see that Eva is a millstone about his neck!

There is no denying that Laszlo is a visionary businessman, who has an intuitive understanding of where the opportunities lie. After all, in only nine years, he has built the import agency from nothing, into a leader in the Montreal needles trade. But he has scant patience for detail, and the devil is in the details. We struggle from one crisis to another. He needs someone at his side who is reliable, level-headed, and capable of bringing discipline to the business. I trust and pray that he sees the light soon.

Because he and I constitute the whole company, we're quite busy, and it is rare that we have opportunity to talk of anything other than business matters. Therefore, I was surprised, when, at the end of the day, he broached the subject of how I spend my free time. For a moment, an irrational hope flared in my heart.

However, my expectations were immediately dashed, for his query led into quite a different direction. He had previously mentioned a family of Hungarian refugees that he had sponsored. They had been his friends before he emigrated. He asked whether I would consider teaching them English.

Lazlo has an amazing ear for languages, and, in addition to Hungarian, he speaks German, French, and Russian. His English is quite good, though he does have an accent, which I actually find quite charming. On occasion I have to correct his usage of idiomatic expressions, and I hope I do not flatter myself when I say that I am a good tutor, my English being precise and grammatical. Therefore, Lazlo's request is not without logic. Yet, I hesitated. I am not a professional teacher; teaching requires not only competence in the subject matter but knowledge of pedagogic technique, and entails a certain responsibility to one's students that I am not sure I am prepared to accept. I asked Lazlo to give me a few days to consider the matter.

Montreal is flooded with new immigrants. You see them on the buses, with their strange clothes and pinched faces. I despair to think of how they will survive. It's hard even for people who grew up here, who have all the advantages of knowing the language and who fit into the culture. I can't imagine myself in similar circumstances; I give them credit for courage. Of course, I surmise from what the papers say that conditions in their own country are so harsh that their difficulties here seem minor.

I do believe that we all have a Christian responsibility to help those less fortunate, but charity starts at home. Mother is not getting any better, unfortunately. She hardly touches the food I leave her every morning. When I come home, she's still sitting in her chair by the window. I need to do something to make her life more pleasant, but it is difficult when she seems so uninterested in helping herself.

Sat. March 23

The Mama find the box and no poems, and she angry. I write new ones when I learn English, but she say be proud of your language. I say the Papa laugh out the poem, but she say he happy because he proud.

Today we shopping in very big store on Cote des Neiges Street. We buy oranges. At home oranges only is at Christmas!

March 23, 1957

The weekends are so difficult. Of course, I never get tired of re-reading my favourite books. I do believe that I was born a hundred years too late. The fundamental virtues are very much unappreciated today.

Maybe I will take Mother to the park tomorrow, but she's getting so frail. And it takes hours to convince her to go anywhere; by the time we leave, I have lost all my enthusiasm.

On Monday I will tell Lazlo that I will tutor his friends in English. We must all do our part, and in any case, it will give me an opportunity to get

out of the apartment. I'm sure they are interesting people, if they're friends of Laszlo.

If only this itching would stop. I have to go to the bathroom every couple of hours to wash myself. I should see Dr. Harvey, but it's so embarrassing.

Wed. March 27

The Mama say tomorrow the teacher coming here for to teach English. Maybe I know faster, and they no more sending to Grade One.

More trouble, because here everybody speak French too. The Papa say in Vienna they say in Canada speak English. The Mama say in Montreal speak French, and why no go to Toronto like the Takacs family, but the Papa say the Uncle Laszlo here is, and he help us.

French lesson is every day in the school. The Friday homework to learn two pages.

March 28, 1957

Tonight I went to see Laszlo's friends. I must say, they were not exactly what I had expected.

When they opened the door to their apartment, it was as if I had been transported to the tropics; I was greeted by a gust of hot and humid air, and almost overwhelmed by pungent odours, only some of which I could identify. Definitely garlic was the predominant theme, with undertones of cooked cabbage, sweat, and, dare I say, urine.

And the noise! Kids screaming, the parents shouting in their harsh language, and pots and pans clanging somewhere. And this was just as I stood in the doorway! It was as if the maws of Hell were beckoning.

I hesitated for a moment, but it was too late to change my mind; I stepped in, and the door closed behind me.

It appears that there are three families all living in one apartment, but I haven't quite sorted it out. The children are all young, and run about in various states of dishabille, the better to display their rather lax standard of personal hygiene.

The adults appear somewhat more civilized, until they smile, at which point you can't help but notice that, without exception, they all have bad teeth. I don't want to be mean-spirited. I'm sure they're good people, and their shortcomings are more a result of poverty and the fact that they just don't know any better.

Teaching them English is going to be very difficult.

They ushered me into the living room, which is crowded with too many sofas, all obviously second-hand. I started with some pronunciation drills, but we were immediately interrupted by packs of grubby kids tearing in and out, and finally we had to move venue. It seems that all the children sleep in the living room, because there are not enough bedrooms.

We adjourned to the kitchen, and closed the door to keep out the rampaging hordes, which made the heat and humidity stifling almost beyond bearing. As well, the men's smoking filled the kitchen with banks of blue haze. But at least it was quiet, and the tobacco sort of reminded me of when Daddy was still alive.

The class proceeded smoothly until I tried to work on vocabulary, but then the fundamental communication problem manifested itself. I attempted to conjugate "to be," but they did not seem to understand, at which point they all started shouting at each other in Hungarian, and my class dissolved into chaos. Finally, one of the women left. For a few moments we smiled at each other uncomfortably, and I started to gather my belongings, assuming that the class had been cancelled. But I was not to be let off the hook so easily; in short order, a little girl of about ten was led into the kitchen. It seems that she speaks enough English to bridge at least the larger gaps in the process, so the class finally settled into a productive mode.

I believe I shall stick with it. They are Laszlo's friends, after all.

Friday, March 29

Today I put up my hand in French and say the two pages. The Miss Mitchell smiling and say good, but the kids laughing. What so funny? Other kids put up the hand. I listen. This is three people speaking! I must speak only one. I ashamed myself, but I no understand the words. I learn but no understand!

The English teacher come our house yesterday. The name Miss Smythe. She work for the Uncle Laszlo. (He not really uncle. He and the Papa soldiers together in the war.)

The Miss Smythe is nice, and she very elegant. She is in high heel shoes, and lipstick, and the hair is puffed up. When get big, I want to look like her.

The adults all in lesson with the Miss Smythe, but the Uncle Joska work at night, and not in lesson. First they say no kids, but the Miss Smythe no understand nothing what they say and I translate, and now I am in class too.

March 30, 1957

I never really appreciated what an extraordinary man Laszlo is. Visiting his friends made me realize just how much he has progressed from what were, no doubt, similarly difficult beginnings. He came to Canada shortly after the war, without a penny, and not a word of English, and now he owns a successful business, drives a Buick, and lives in Outremont. Of course, Eva sits at home, spending every cent he makes. To think of what he could accomplish with a truly loving helpmate!

Daddy always said, "The Jews, they have a gift for making money." Even though both Grandpa and Daddy had good jobs at the bank, it took them two generations just to buy a house. We didn't even have a car until I was in secretary school, and then we had to sell it to pay for Daddy's funeral.

The Jews come here with nothing, but after a few years, they have cars, houses, fancy clothes.... I must say, though, that for the most part, they don't have much taste or culture.

But Laszlo is different. He speaks five languages, he attends the symphony, and he's constantly reading, trying to improve himself. He also has a chameleon-like quality that fascinates me. Our customers tend to be a fairly uniform lot, but there is a great diversity among our suppliers, given that they come from all over Europe. I have observed that Laszlo takes on a different persona, depending on the background of the person he is dealing with. His ability to establish rapport is nothing short of amazing.

Monday, April 1

Last night I dream a snake crawling on my body and around the neck, and choking me. I wake up suddenly and Gabor is pulling a cold spaghetti on my neck, and the other kids standing around my bed, shouting "April Fool!" I screaming, and they all laugh, and I say I tell Mama, and she hit him, but Mama already go to work. Then I must make breakfast for all the six of them. They joking around, and no leave for school, and we all late, and get paper to sign.

Then Mama come home tonight and I say it's Gabor and the other kids. She say, "Kati, you the oldest." Always she say that. Not fair!

I hope I no dream tonight. I hate snakes!

April 14, 1957

Yesterday, it was my birthday, and we had a bit of a party. Diana, whom I know from secretary school, was here, but Sheila couldn't make it because her youngest had a fever. Two of Mother's friends were also in attendance, and Mrs. Duncan from next door brought a cake. We drank too much sherry, and

afterward I had a slight headache, so I went to bed early, but couldn't sleep.

I can't quite accept that I'm thirty-six years old. I still think of myself as about thirteen. At that age, everything was ahead of me. I could hardly wait to get to high school. Every morning I saw the two Prescott boys heading to King George Secondary, tossing a football. As Tommy swung his head to make the catch, his blond hair would get in his eyes, and I wondered how he could see the ball. That year, Mother was the same age as I am right now.

My English class is starting to develop into a solid routine, with my students making definite progress. Katie, the little girl who was recruited to translate, is a great help. In some ways, I see in her that same drive that Laszlo has, to overcome her primitive background. I can tell that between lessons she puts in prodigious amounts of time in trying to improve her vocabulary and pronunciation. In other areas as well, she displays a feverish eagerness to learn. For example, one of the fathers made a compliment about my dress during the last lesson. (I'm sure he was just being polite, as well as showing off some of his new vocabulary.) In any case, after the class, Katie asked me whether I could help her arrange her hair like mine.

She is a sweet girl, with a very affectionate nature, and I suspect that her aspirations somewhat isolate her from her family.

Dr. Harvey said I have a "yeast infection." I don't see how that's possible, because I keep myself very clean.

Sunday, April 14

Today I climb up to the cave where I burn my poems. Sometimes I must come away from home.

Aunt Margit and Aunt Hedi fighting this morning. Aunt Hedi say Aunt Margit never clean up after herself in the kitchen. Aunt Hedi is always last coming home from work, and then she make dinner for her family. It is true, Aunt Margit is messy. Always much fighting in the kitchen.

From the cave, you see nearly the whole city. I come home only when it is nearly dark.

April 29, 1957

Actually, I'm starting to look forward to my English class every Thursday. There are only six students left—Katie, her mother and father, the father's younger brother and his wife, and his sister. Two others have dropped out because they were too tired after work, and one works nights.

It seems that there are actually four families, not three, as I had originally concluded. Their apartment is maybe twice as big as ours; how they all fit in is beyond my comprehension. It's always noisy, the children are like little savages,

and the odours are pervasive, but slowly I'm getting used to the environment. They're very warm-hearted people, and keep offering me food. I don't want to offend them, but my stomach is quite delicate, and I'm sure I couldn't handle the spices they use, to speak nothing of all the garlic.

Despite their poverty, they seem happy. They're constantly making jokes, and laughing, and bursting into loud, vehement discussions. I keep saying, "In English, in English!" but they are so impulsive, it's as difficult to control them as children. Ironically, Katie is the easiest to manage.

Slowly their vocabulary is increasing, though their grammar is atrocious. But, for their purposes, I guess that's not so important.

Wednesday, May 15

I think I am in love. A boy in my class, his name is Paul, and he is very cute. He is smaller than the other boys, but bigger than me, and he has black hair. It is combed to the side. He always makes jokes in class, but Miss Mitchell smiles. When he finishes giving an answer, he does not sit down. First he puts the finger to his temple, like he is shooting himself, and then falls into his seat. Now the other boys imitate him.

I am learning lots of English from Miss Smythe. I think I am faster than the adults. Miss Smythe tries to teach them to pronounce the, because in our language there is not this sound. Everybody say da or dza, only I say the. Miss Smythe says if we put pencil in the mouth sideways, it helps to pronounce English. For the whole week, everybody puts a pencil in the mouth, and say English words to the others. Then they all laugh. They are so silly.

Miss Smythe gives me red ribbon for the hair, and show how to comb like her. Looks pretty!

Uncle Istvan losed his job. Papa said he does not know how to pay the rent.

May 15, 1957

Laszlo asked me to reserve a place in the Laurentians for the whole of July. Last year, they were gone only for two weeks, and I nearly went crazy by myself in the office. I don't know if I can survive a whole month.

My English students are coming along quite well. Katie's father seems to have a gift for languages. (He speaks German and Russian, in addition to Hungarian.) And Katie speaks well enough now so that I can actually have a conversation with her.

I wore my silk blouse to the class last week (I bought it on sale), and received several compliments. I think for tomorrow's class, I will try the green

dress I purchased last year. It's not suitable for the office, and I have not yet had the opportunity to wear it.

Katie's mother must have been very beautiful when she was younger, but now she seems faded and always tired. Apparently she works ten hours a day at some clothing factory, and they only get Sundays off. I get the impression that even though the women work such long hours, they're still expected to cook and clean and take care of the kids.

Sometimes I wonder why we struggle to get married. Of course, Laszlo's wife has no kids to take care of, and when she's not out spending his money, she's lounging about, resting from her exertions.

Wednesday, May 29

Today Paul spoke to me during recess. He asked that I wanted to tiptoe through the tulips with him. Then he ran away. I don't understand. I will ask Miss Smythe what this means.

Uncle Istvan got a job in a grocery store. He must to pay back the money we borrowed from Uncle Laszlo for the rent.

June 1, 1957

I am so happy! Laszlo's supplier from Scotland is coming to Montreal in July, so Laszlo will have to stay in town, at least for a few days. Maybe I can invite him for dinner. I don't think it would be improper; he will have no one to cook for him, so it's the decent thing to offer him a nice meal. I could make a roast, and Mother used to make wonderful Waldorf salad.

The English lessons are coming along well, but I must say, my students are somewhat uninhibited. The men slap the women on the behind, and they kiss each other right in front of me. Sometimes I feel like I am right in the middle of one of those racy foreign movies.

I do believe one of the men is even flirting with me. I don't quite know what to make of it. Perhaps it's just a communication problem.

That yeast infection seems to be back. The itching drives me crazy. I have to see Dr. Harvey again.

Thursday, June 6

I hate Paul! He's so immature. When I told him that I would tiptoe through the tulips with him, he ran away, and then I saw him talking to some other boys and laughing.

We are still having English classes at home. Miss Smythe is so kind to help us. I hope she does not find out what they say about her. Papa and Uncle Istvan say she is an old maid and she needs a man. Miss Smythe turns

very red when Uncle Istvan kisses Aunt Margit, so they don't stop to do it. Uncle Istvan is so immature.

June 12, 1957

I can't decide whether to ask Laszlo about dinner now, or just wait until the last moment, so it seems casual. But then, how will I prepare? Mother can't go shopping by herself, and I'm working during the day. Well, I have a few weeks to figure it out.

After my English class last week, the little girl, Katie, called me aside and showed me some poems she had written. Considering she's only ten years old, and especially in view of the fact that she was first exposed to the English language only six months ago, her work is amazingly good. She's particularly strong in her ability to create visual images; perhaps the ideas she expresses lack adult sophistication, but they have a charming purity. I made a few suggestions about grammatical construction and word choice, but her English is improving so rapidly that it will soon be adequate to the task. Katie is clearly a very talented child. I doubt that she gets the support and encouragement that she deserves, given the environment in which she's growing up. Obviously she needs intellectual guidance, and I believe that my unique relationship to the family obliges me to supply this. My adored nineteenth-century authors shall provide such rich sustenance for her burgeoning talent!

Wednesday, June 12

We have examinations in one week. My English is better, and now I don't go to Grade One. I have no problems with arithmetic and science. History and geography are difficult, so I must study more. I don't know about French.

Last night at supper, Uncle Istvan said that Miss Smythe needs "service," and then they all laughed, and Aunt Margit said that a farmer should plough his own field first, and then they laughed again. Uncle Peter said that they should at least "heat up" Miss Smythe. They're so immature, but even Mama smiled.

I started to write poems again, but now they are in English. I showed some to Miss Smythe, and she said that they are very good, but maybe she is just polite.

June 13, 1957

I've never been so scared in my life! I still feel faint when I think of what a close call it was!

After the English lesson, they always call a taxi for me, and then someone comes down with me to wait at the front entrance of the apartment building. Tonight it was Steven, and as we were waiting in the doorway, he kept edging closer to me, until I could feel the heat of his body, and that animal smell they all have. He's maybe an inch shorter than I am, but he looked at me with this grin, and my heart started pounding like it was going to jump out of my throat, and then he put his arm around me, and I thought I would die right on the spot, but the taxi arrived just at that moment and then he just pretended that he wanted to help me into the taxi.

I don't know what would have happened if the taxi hadn't come, but in any case, I'm not going back there again. Those savages! How could they be so ungrateful?

Thursday, June 20

Miss Smythe didn't come tonight. Uncle Peter said that maybe Uncle Istvan had heated her too much, and then Aunt Margit said that too much heat spoils the soup, and they all laughed.

Papa said she's just taking a summer vacation, but I don't think she's coming back. It's a shame. She was so elegant.

We get our report cards tomorrow. I hope I did okay.