

FROM OLD WORLD TO NEW

EMERIC and Rosemary were born at the beginning of the twentieth century in two very different places: Rosemary in a town in Scotland, part of the British Empire, and Emeric in a small hamlet in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Unfortunately, there is little information about Rosemary's childhood and youth. Emeric however, wrote an autobiography for the family, thus many details are available about his early years and his struggles to leave Europe.



I was born in 1906—the year of the great earthquake of San Francisco—in Dombrovitz, Hungary, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My father supervised a large forest exploitation. We were living at the head of a small specially built narrow-gauge railway line. My younger sister, Blanca, and brother Paul were also born there. My youngest brother Ernest was born in Herrmanstadt [now Sibiu, Romania, but at that time, Hungary].

When I was eight years old, we saw from our window a regiment of Hungarian Hussars riding to the railway station and from there to the Serbian front. They were dressed in red and blue uniforms, garlanded with flowers, accompanied by music and the cheers of hundreds of onlookers. When the gaiety of this spectacle had passed, I asked my mother with tears in my eyes why can't I go with them to war to defend my beloved fatherland. Up to the age of 13, I was a well-indoctrinated Hungarian patriot, convinced that there was no better country to live in than Hungary.

Then my father placed me in a German Gymnasium (high school), as German was the language of Central Europe, to broaden my education. Here I learned to my great surprise that German literature, art and science were superior to that of Hungary. In fact I came to believe that it was superior to that of any other country in the world.

When I was fifteen, [after the end of World War I] our part of Hungary became part of Romania and I had to enroll in a Romanian high school, without knowing the language. I was the only foreigner in a class of 18 Romanians. I had to get up at five in the

morning and study until late at night to master the language and the subjects without losing a year. After three years among the Romanians I discovered that they sincerely believed that their literature, history and art are among the most outstanding in the world, and were willing to fight, and if necessary die, for their country.

By now I had enough of nationalism. I could feel and see the hatred between nations ... This deep-rooted separation I found not only among nations and ethnic groups, but also among religions. In my town there were Lutherans, Catholics and [Romanian] Orthodox, who disliked each other, and all three hated the Jews. I was a young idealist with great dreams for the future of mankind. Most idealistic Jews of my generation became Zionists. I could not share their feelings since I believed that the time for nation-building is over.

The future in my view belonged to an international community in which ethnic, national and religious loyalties are subordinated to a greater loyalty, including all mankind. I wanted to get out of Europe where the atmosphere was choking me. I wanted to go to the new world, America, the dream of my generation.



Leaving Home

My father had a very good position with an Austro-Hungarian corporation...until the collapse of the Empire, when he lost not only his livelihood but through devaluation his lifesavings; life insurance and other investments were not worth the paper they were written on. Unemployment insurance or social security of any kind did not exist then. In desperation my mother had to appeal to her oldest sister Ilka, whose husband, Armin Valko, was the only wealthy member in our family. This was the bitterest pill for my father to take.²

Knowing that American immigration restrictions at this time were severe, and rejecting the next possibility, Canada, as too cold, Emeric decided on Australia as his goal. But how was he to get there?

He found a job as German-Romanian correspondent for a shipping company in Constanza on the Black Sea and spent his free time at the harbour seeking work on ships bound for Australia. He had no luck. He was compet-

ing with too many experienced sailors. At the British Consulate, the secretary suggested he go to Hamburg in Germany. From there he would have a better chance to attain his goal of Australia.

I went back to Sibiu and applied for a passport. Since I was approaching the age of compulsory military service, I got one for six months only. My mother, to whom I felt very close, tried to persuade me to give up this reckless idea of going into the strange wide world without money, proper papers or friends. With my education, she said, I could make a comfortable living in Romania, and we would all remain together. I was however, determined to get out, and was willing to risk my life in the attempt. I was driven by an irresistible urge I could not and would not suppress.

When I was about seventeen, I had read a book in Hungarian by a vegetarian who became healthy and strong by living on raw food. I was impressed and wanted to experiment on myself. ...While following this diet as closely as possible [in Constanza] I could save enough money to pay for my fare to Hamburg and room and board for a few months.

I packed a small suitcase and said goodbye without knowing if and when I would see my family again. My mother could not come to the station. When the train pulled out only my father, with tears in his eyes, and Paul who was then sixteen, waved their hands and then their handkerchiefs.³

En route to Hamburg, Emeric visited relatives.

It was fall. The train was winding its way through the foothills of the Carpathians, the leaves turning in the sunshine. I stopped in Bolesov, Czechoslovakia, where my maternal grandfather, Marcus Adler, lived with the Steiner family.

The last time I had seen them was ten years before, when my grandmother [Johanna] was also alive. At that time, in 1916, we came as refugees to stay one year, as our part of Transylvania was being invaded ... and my father was in the Austro-Hungarian army. My grandparents had a country store, two cows and a few acres of land. They had no electricity. The streets were muddy and unpaved. I helped my grandfather gather walnuts from under a tree. Now, ten years later, he looked to me much older and weak,

while I must have appeared to him grown up and strong. When I left for the unknown, he blessed me and gave me a slice of bread with salt, in conformity with custom. I was not religious but was touched by the gesture.

My next stop was Berlin, where my mother had arranged that I visit her second cousin, Mr. Kutchera, the owner of the famous Kaffee WIEN on Kurfuerstendamm Strasse. He welcomed me in his luxurious office, arranged for a sumptuous meal, and then told me that in his youth he went to New York to find gold on the streets - just as I want to do now. But since he did not know English, all he could get was a job as dishwasher. When he got tired of it, he came back to Germany. "Now," he said, "look at me; I am living comfortable and prosperous." He was very skeptical about the outcome of my adventure. Nevertheless, he gave me three English pounds in gold coins for good luck.⁴



Hamburg

Arriving in the port city of Hamburg, Emeric rented a small room in a boarding house. When Mrs. Schroeder, his landlady, learned why he had come to Hamburg, she was not encouraging. There were many unemployed in Germany, including thousands of sailors also looking for work. The only chance, she told him, would be to find work on foreign ships.

There was a mustering place, run by a Herr Kraemer, to fill occasional vacancies on foreign ships. I came to the yard in front of his office where about 100 sailors, mostly German, were loitering from morning until evening, day after day, week after week, waiting for a vacancy. ... Since my decision, about a year before to emigrate to an English-speaking country, I studied English almost every day. In school, I had had to study [several] languages, but not English. My English was, therefore, self-taught. I could read and spell, but could not communicate. Nobody understood my pronunciation, nor could I understand others. For instance, I asked for breed, meaning bread. I knew that in heat 'ea' was pronounced as 'e'. I therefore assumed that in bread 'ea' is pronounced the same way. When I said labor, I pronounced 'a' the same as in harbor. I could not believe that the English could be that inconsistent and illogical. Later, I had to unlearn my English and learn to speak it again. Why did the English not choose another phonetic language as their own?

I presented myself with trepidation before Mr. Kraemer, a retired sailor with a limp in his walk. To register me he wanted to see my passport. He then asked me a few questions in English. The examination was passable but not satisfactory. Besides I was never on a ship before. Nevertheless, he registered me as a deck hand. ... And then I started to wait in that yard, mostly wet and damp like Hamburg in late fall, from morning to sunset, day after day, week after week and month after month. I wrote home every week. My mother suggested I come home. ... I would now take any ship, anywhere. Australia seemed far away.

I discovered the brand of cigar Mr. Kraemer was smoking. I found an opportunity to give him about two dozen. It was not his fault that nobody wanted a deck hand. Foreign ships hired their crew in their home port. Only occasionally a seaman got sick or was discharged, and needed replacement. My chances were slim. Mrs. Schroeder guessed from my hands and word structure that I was not a laborer or a sailor. She knew I wanted to get out of Europe, and sympathized with my hardships. Occasionally, she gave me a hot soup. My money and also my passport were inexorably running out.

And then after three months of hopeless but persistent waiting, a friend told me to be there next Sunday as there might be a vacancy for a deckhand. ... Mr. Kraemer came out of his office and was asking us this Sunday afternoon (there were only about two dozen present) for a deckhand. He asked me to come in. The officer looked at me and asked if I spoke English. I answered yes Sir, I do speak English. When Mr. Kraemer confirmed this I was hired at fifteen dollars per month on the SS BURUTU of the Ellster Dempster Line, sailing next day for West Africa which was malaria country.⁵



Hazardous Journey

I felt like [I was] in heaven, for I was on the way. The BURUTU was a 10,000 ton freighter, registered in Liverpool, carrying a mixed cargo and was to return with peanuts for the manufacture of margarine. My roommate in a small cabin was another deckhand, a Berliner, who had sailed before. We had no bed-linen. For three months I slept on a thin straw mattress, and covered myself with a cheap grey horsehair blanket, made of waste cotton, which I had bought in a store. ... My duties alternated with the other deckhand.

One week I had to bring our meals from the galley to the mess hall, wash all the dishes, scrub the floor and the table ... and wash the bathrooms. The next week I worked on deck with the bosun and three seamen, washing the decks, painting, greasing steel cables, delivering messages.

My plan now was to catch malaria while in Africa, get hospitalized and when recovered, sign on a ship headed for Australia, or at least in that direction.

Leaving the Elbe we entered a very rough North Sea and I was wretchedly seasick. Being on kitchen duty I had to serve the meals three times a day, sickness or no sickness. To make matters worse as we sailed west we entered a storm and we had to circle three nights and days before we could enter the port of Antwerp. I was so miserable that I would have welcomed falling overboard. For me life was not worth living. Finally after an eternity of suffering we reached port. I felt like having been reborn. I wrote home as I continued to write from almost every port.

Christmas Eve we were sailing south in the English Channel. Well after midnight a sailor—who was on watch—bursts into our quarters and shouts: “All men on deck. We have collided with another ship.” We dress rapidly and run up on deck. The sea is relatively calm and the stars are shining. We had collided with a French sailing ship with eighty hands on board coming loaded from Africa, which sank in five minutes with all eighty men except four, who in the moment of collision jumped over onto our deck. We lowered two lifeboats, but they could not find any survivors. The front of our iron ship was slightly damaged, where we had hit the middle of the wooden boat. We limped into Freetown, England, for a week of repairs and official inquiry. I never found out the result of the inquiry. It had been a clear night, but, being Christmas, they might have drunk too much. The Frenchmen were at the end of a six month journey, one day short of home.

We were now in the Atlantic on the way to Tenerife. First thing in the morning, we had to wash the decks. The sailors had rubber boots, but I, poor deckhand, washed barefoot. As we moved south the water got warmer, and the task pleasanter.

One calm, sunny day we noticed smoke coming out of one of the hatches. On investigation, it was found that the ship was on fire. The coal bunker was burning. The sailors were swearing about the ship and this voyage. We then pumped seawater into the bunker for about three hours, until the ship was safe to continue its voyage.

Africa

We visited Sierra Leone. Accra on the Gold Coast (now Ghana) was a small town. Its only imposing building was the British governor's residence. I made friends with a young African and told him I would like to see an African jungle. He took me for a long walk through a forest, and when we came back at about six, it suddenly turned dark as it does in the tropics. A British official, dressed in white, approached us with a flashlight in hand, and scolded my companion and then hit him in the face. He told me that it was a rule that after dark he had to carry a light. Witnessing that treatment and the poverty around I lost sympathy for colonial empires. For an old, torn undergarment, or a few slices of white bread, we could get a large bunch of bananas or a couple of pineapples.

We sailed for about two weeks up the Niger, collecting peanuts. At one of our stops about six of our crew were invited to visit a tribal chief. We were taken in two dugout canoes through dense jungle for about two hours in narrow streams to his camp. He was taller than I, about 80, with grey hair, had ten wives and was called King George. Since I was the tallest in our group he gave me special attention. The heat made us perspire constantly. I told myself this is a good place to catch malaria.

Our last stop was Port Harcourt. Three sailors got malaria. I had to bring them food and water. ... I did not get sick, therefore I had to return to Hamburg. For three months work I had earned forty-five dollars. It made me feel rich. Besides I had a discharge paper, making me feel like a seasoned sailor.

But my passport had expired. No other ship would sign me on without a valid passport. I went to the Romanian Consulate and asked for an extension for six months. Since I was due to apply for military service, the consul was supposed to extend it only sufficiently for me to return to Romania. Through an oversight he signed it for six months and I felt ... in seventh heaven.⁶