

The Shattered World of Dora and Laci

An impossible love in the Hungarian Uprising of 1956

Paul Streumer¹

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“We have a shattered world around us ... A rough road lies ahead.”
Winston Churchill, Victory speech, 1945

Dora Scarlett ran a clinic in a small valley in the deep south of India. We were sitting on a wooden bench in front of her white-washed mud house, looking straight into the flowery bushes which shielded her verandah from outside view. The old lady spoke softly and intensely about people from her time in the communist party and the uprising² in Hungary in 1956. But then she mentioned something very personal. “I had a friend there. ... He was a good friend. We would have married.” Back in my room, I made my notes as usual, and put them away with no idea what to do with them. They never ceased to hound me. Who was this man, and why didn't they marry?



Horváth József, Fortepan 265789, Üllői út, a crowd watching a tank in front of house number 61.

¹ Paul Streumer, PhD Leiden University in Indian Languages and Cultures, is an independent historian based in The Netherlands. He is the author of *A Land of Their Own, Samuel Richard Tickell and the formation of the autonomous Ho country in Jharkhand, 1818-1842*, Wakkaman, Houten, 2nd edition 2021. See www.wakkaman.com.

² I use here “uprising” for the events of 1956. Dora herself used “revolt” in her book. Other people prefer to call it “revolution”. But “revolution” refers to a sudden political change with long lasting consequences.

Her remark seemed out of character. As her biographer Caroline Walker remarked, "it is difficult to discern, from her writings and from friend's observations, any reference to a romantic relationship with anyone."³ It took a few decades before material appeared that could give context to Dora's extraordinary words.⁴

In the shadow of the bougainvillea

It was February 1990, the Berlin Wall had fallen three months earlier, the future was in the air, and only the past was uncertain. The bus went through the glorious Tamil Nadu countryside: green paddy fields, small villages in the dust. In passing, one heard film songs, a piece of Carnatic music, flattered one's self with recognising a classical Thyagaraja composition. The bus from Madurai stopped in a small valley surrounded by the silent hills of the Western Ghats. I recognised from previous visits the reddish colour of the sand path, on its sides a hedge of dark green small trees. They had grown since last time.

It was another past that had bought me back. I had just come out of a vicious divorce. My ex-wife came from Czechoslovakia, then part of the Soviet Bloc. They still were there, the memories of the train stopping at the German-Czech border, in the middle of the night at a badly lit spot in the mountains; the square watchtowers reminiscent of German concentration camps, the guards in badly fitting green uniforms, the dogs barking to stop anybody from running off into the desolate dark woods. In the train, the talks went down to a whisper, never to recover after the train started moving again. Later, arrived at my parents in law, the day took over, with the table set in Russian style, all the dishes on the table at the same time, the slivovice or better still, the local cognac, and the talks. Everybody was very talkative, anxious to draw attention to one's self. But always respectful.

³ *Love Made Visible*, p. 32.

⁴ The major source on Dora Scarlett's life is the excellent biography by Caroline Walker, *Love Made Visible, The life and work of Dora Scarlett*, with a foreword by Satish Kumar, privately published, 2020.

Dora's own attempt at autobiography, *Dora Scarlett, A Memoir*, (from now on *Memoir* in the notes) was edited and published in 2020 by Caroline Walker. It can be downloaded from the website of Village Service Trust,

<https://villageservicetrust.org.uk/>.

The most important primary source of this period is, of course, Dora Scarlett, *Window onto Hungary*, 1959, Bradford: Broadacre Books. It gives the background to, and a vivid eyewitness account of the short-lived Hungarian uprising of 1956. It very rarely appears in an antiquary bookshop online.

And we have Laci's sister Szeszlerné Göndör Márta's account of her life on the website *Centropa*,

<https://www.centropa.org/hu/biography/szeszlerne-gondor-marta> and a connected page showing some documents and pictures of the family with her explanations, <https://www.centropa.org/hu/photo/menedekjogot-igazolo-dokumentum> (in Hungarian).

In addition, this period - but never this feeling - is referred to in the letters Dora wrote to Laci, copies of which were gracefully made available to me by Caroline Walker and Tony Huckle of the Village Service Trust, where most of Dora Scarlett's materials reside. There are some 54 letters left in copies and in transcript. The first is dated April 12, 1959, the last October 21, 1982. There is a gap between May 1965 and April 1970. Quite some more letters are lost. Some never arrived or were lost in a postal strike - others were not stored or even copied. All the letters are from Dora to Laci; surprisingly, none are from Laci to Dora. Many of these letters were aerograms and had Laci's address on it. At one time, presumably after Laci's death, they were sent to Dr Ralph Russell, SOAS, London. He passed them on to Tony Huckle of the Village Service Trust, who in his turn passed them on to Dora's biographer Caroline Walker (Tony Huckle, personal information, 22 April 2023).

Immediately after the talk with Dora Scarlett in 1990, referred to above, I made handwritten notes, which I still have in the original. In the text I refer to these with "Dora:" or "Dora said".

Often about politics. Not about the past. My father-in-law was a Spanish Civil War veteran, I knew.⁵ He actually had led the last batch of the International Brigade over the French border in 1939.⁶ He himself did not mention that. He and his wife met in the resistance in Paris. She was a Russian from Odessa. How she came to Paris was never referred to, but from loose remarks I gathered that it was through Palestine. From my wife I had learned that her father had been condemned to hard labour in the uranium mines in the early fifties. “He had been in Spain, and so must have been contaminated with capitalist ideas.” She was unaware of that Palestine – and therefore Jewish – past of her mother, which would not have posed a problem on my side of the border. In eastern Europe, a lot was left unsaid, dark like the countryside the previous night.

I hadn’t seen Dora Scarlett for years. I had remembered her vividly, when I found in a reader a chapter of her book about the Hungarian uprising of 1956.⁷ The style was unmistakably hers. A few years later, when I came to India to do research on tribal India in the Kolkata archives, I felt I had to go to the deep south and visit her. There was a silent bond between the people who “knew”, who had experience of what had been “the socialism as it really existed”. It had promised so much and crashed so completely. It was hard to make sense out of our experiences.

Now Dora Scarlett was 85 years old. She had settled here a few decades before, as she said, “quiet as a mouse” and established this small volunteer clinic, Seva Nilayam. I knew preciously little about her past. Only that one chapter, that chance discovery, suggested something of what she had left behind.

We greeted; I was shown a simple guest room with a lovely view on the darkish green of a field of banana plants. I settled quickly, and went for the afternoon tea in the kitchen. The kitchen was from the early years of the clinic, whitewashed low mud walls, thick at the bottom and tapering as they got higher. Frankly, it was more cooling to sit outside on the small bench and look out over the courtyard. But inside there was a small bookshelf. Old pocket books. Lederer and Burdick’s *The Ugly American* (how American diplomats in SE Asia were continually outsmarted by Communist down-to-earth tactics; it was considered as the answer to Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*); E. F. Schumacher’s *Small is beautiful (A Study of Economics as if People Mattered)*, and *Christ in India* by Dom Bede Griffiths on the Hindu–Christian dialogue in South India. Books that spoke of intense and original thinking.

My present for Dora was in another league. I brought her a 1926 first edition in the original dustjacket of Anita Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, subtitled *The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady*. The heroine was a very blonde and street wise girl from Little Rock, Arkansas, who made all men around her lose their heads and give her presents with little chance of permanent success. Her motto was “Kissing your hand may make you feel very good but a diamond bracelet lasts forever”. Dora was delighted. She loved the book. I had guessed rightly. There had been a life before Seva Nilayam.

In the evening we would faintly hear the temple music from the distant village.

⁵ Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. For a short overview, see Spanish Civil War summary, in Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Spanish-Civil-War>.

⁶ As he has virtually disappeared from the records, I give his name: Antonín Svoboda. The event is mentioned by his friend and fellow Spain International Brigadist, Artur London. At the very end of that war, he met him in the last village before the border, where he was setting up the machine guns to cover the final retreat. “Il avait belle allure dans son uniforme, les cheveux déjà presque complètement blancs. On sentait son ascendant sur ses hommes.” Artur London, *L’Aveu, Dans l’engrenage du Procès de Prague*, Tome I, [Paris]: Éditions Gallimard, 1986, pp. 122-123.

⁷ Lommax Bill (ed.) *Eyewitness in Hungary: the Soviet Invasion of 1956*, 1980, Nottingham: Spokesman.

“I had a friend”

Seva Nilayam had its set rhythm. After the midday meal, there was the siesta. The first-aid remained closed, the indoor patients took a rest, and so did we. But the second day, Dora asked me to come and have a talk. I had not been to her small mud house before. It was shaded by a flowering bougainvillea. Years ago, she had taken it as a sapling from Varkala, where we had first met in the gurukula (preceptor’s school) of Nataraja Guru. Dora set me on the small bench on the verandah.

She came outside with a small bottle of Indian whiskey, Dowager. I was surprised, did not even know that she was not a teetotaler. Seva Nilayam was a clinic, of course. With its mud houses, shady paths and flowers, it also felt like an ashram, where the rest of the world was far. Here, one could contemplate and reflect. Taking a dram was not part of the routine. But curiously, because it was made of soft plastic, the small bottle did fit in the ambience.

Dora said, “I was living in Liverpool, I was nine, it was still in the First World War. I was sent by my mother to buy something. I went through back streets, arrived in the German’s shop. These Germans were selling lard, sausages and German cakes. They went along very well with everybody. But I saw that their house was looted. Everything, the sausages, cakes, furniture was thrown outside. A big piano was thrown from the first floor. A British soldier, with his coat open, was sitting and playing the broken piano. Apparently, it was some ribald song, from the way people were laughing. I did not go nearer, ran back, and even stepped on the pottery, raw from the outside, glazed on the inside, in which the lard was kept.” Such a vivid detail. But it flashed by. Something larger was on her mind. “That was racism. People are peaceful neighbours and suddenly loot each other’s house or kill each other.” Except that in this riot, people did not get killed.

I said “It is ironical that you ended up in India, where this happens so often.” Dora had to laugh: “It is ironical.”

In the Great War, England had taken a big hit. Then came the crisis years, and ultimately England fought Germany in the Second World War. But the war, though successful, was waged on money borrowed from the USA. Now the UK was deeply in debt. It was said that when the Mountbatten’s arrived in Delhi, lady Edwina Mountbatten saw that their dogs’ food was roasted chicken breasts. She took the meat, locked herself in the bathroom and ate it all.⁸ By March 1947, it was clear that the UK could no longer afford the Empire.⁹ It gave up on India and Pakistan, which became independent states a few months later. In Europe, the Soviet Union quickly went from ally to competitor. It was not seen as a fellow democracy. In most countries where the Soviet army was stationed, Communists took over government.

During the second world War, Dora had joined the communist party and rose in it. In 1948, she was invited to the Sokol festival in Prague held on 22nd July. Things did not go smoothly to start with. “At first the CS Embassy did not want to give a visa. ... My lady friend pulled some strings in Prague, and I could go.” The journey through Europe had been a shock. “I went through

⁸ Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, Sahidabad: Vikas Publishing House, 1978, pp. 70-71.

⁹ Peter Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire, The demise of a superpower, 1944-47*, 2008, London; Penguin Books, pp. 314, 427.

Germany. You cannot imagine how Europe looked like after the war. It was all in ruins. Cologne station had no glass windows, no roof. You could buy nothing there. People walked in all kinds of mended clothes; skirts made of patches. In Nurnberg there were just paths through the rubble, and the Germans thought it was the same in England! Only across the border with Czechoslovakia, I heard people laughing.”

Then she encountered the mentality of the local communists in Czechoslovakia. “I came in Prague; it was just in the days that Edvard Beneš [the social democrat president] had stepped down. I was sitting with my friend having tea on a balcony overlooking Wenceslas Square. The Sokol demonstration came down over the square. Suddenly – it must have been on a sign – the Sokols unfolded British and American flags and banners [Dora moved her hands apart at shoulder height, indicating a small banner] and started to shout slogans; ‘We want Beneš back.’ My friend said, ‘This is the true voice of the Czech people’. I do not remember what happened to the demonstration, most probably they left it alone. After a few days I talked about it with my friend, who said ‘Those Sokol people are [now] under control’. That is how [the Communists] were, they knew the people did not want their rule. Still, they remained communists [and in power]. The manners of these people.”

We shifted towards Hungary. I mentioned the treatment of the Hungarian Jews, who were sent to destruction during the last year of the war. Dora filled the glasses again. “There are so few Jews left.”

“I had a friend there who was Jewish. His father and mother died in Auschwitz. He had tried to get them to Turkey, without success. After he learned his parents had died, he joined the English army in Northern Africa, against Rommel. Fought at El Alamein [1942]. He became communist.

“He was married to a Hungarian girl, born and raised in England. In 1948 he went to Hungary to build socialism. His wife did not trust it. So, he went alone. He lived in an expensive basement. But he could get only factory work, although he spoke four languages. They [the Hungarian communists] told him, ‘You were in the British Army. They influenced you with their ideology.’ He answered: ‘But I was fighting Hitler.’

“His wife was still working in the Brazilian Embassy in Toronto. The Hungarians in Budapest wanted him to divorce her. He refused to do that without talking to her. If he could, he would have divorced her. After nearly eight years they had grown far apart. He was a good friend. We would have married. I would have been the right companion for him.

“In ’56 when the Russians came in Hungary, the border was a few days open. He got no help from the British Embassy. He walked 300 miles to Vienna. And met his wife again.”

She had spoken slowly. A resident English volunteer Diana asked me afterwards, “Does she know that you are a writer? She spoke at dictating speed.” That, I must say, put an obligation on me. But I had little to go by.

Hungarian, Jew, Canadian connection. He could not get work on his level, but found life in Hungary worthwhile enough to stay. That’s all I knew. I did not even have his name.

After Dora’s biography *Love Made Visible* appeared in 2020, I asked Caroline Walker. The answer came by returning mail, “I am intrigued by your mention of the ‘love of her life’. ...

Was the man she mentioned to you Laci Gondor from Hungary? I have some letters from her to him but none from him to her. He emigrated to Canada.”¹⁰

The desert rat in the basement

Actually, he was called Göndör László. But his sister Szeszlerné Göndör Márta and his friends called him Laci. Laci was her hero. Her own life story is on the Hungarian language website Centropa. It is part of a remarkable collection of interviews with over 1,000 elderly Jews who told their life stories of the 20th century.¹¹ It was a stunning find. Dora’s friend got his name, his family background, and there were even some personal documents and photographs. In one stroke Laci came alive through his sister.

Listen to Szeszlerné Göndör Márta:

“My mother had five siblings: four girls and one boy. ... My mother, Friedrich Olga, was the youngest daughter, ... a child of a slightly more bourgeois family than my father. ... She was so charming that she also charmed the people at the harvest, where my father also worked, and he fell in love with her right away. After the harvest, on November 10, 1912, their wedding took place. That must have been very quickly, because usually, the harvest is not before September. I don't think it was a well-considered marriage, but it lasted a long time. On September 2, 1913, my brother Laci was born.

The first five years, Laci did not see his father who was in the military, taking care of the artillery horses. When the World War I ended in 1918, he returned and Laci “suddenly got a father who [moreover] was strict and grumpy.” To make things worse, in 1919 Márta was born. Hence, Laci got little attention from his father. When he was 13, Laci had a Bar Mitzva, where he got the name Zev. That, unsurprisingly, did not make Laci an adult. He was still 13. Márta spoke of domestic violence. “Laci ... received big slaps and later also beatings with a belt, if he went to play soccer instead of studying.” Still, he was an award-winning student.

Laci studied law in Debrecen. He was a good athlete, held the collegiate record in the 100-meter dash. But riots between Hungarians and Jews – in which Laci could give as well as take – speak of an unruly environment. He graduated in 1935, and joined the army. On demobilisation, his father forced him to become a locksmith, but he got into a fight with the Jewish owners. “Then he felt that not only did he not want to be a lawyer, he didn't want to be a locksmith either. He wanted to be a writer, journalist and commentator, a champion of truth. There was no way to do that in Hungary.” In the years 1938-1940, discrimination against Jews was inscribed in law, imposing successively a quota in employment, designating them as a race, and finally restricting intermarriage with non-Jews. But already in 1939, Laci had seen enough.

¹⁰ Caroline Walker, personal communication, 18-11-2020.

¹¹ Centropa was founded in 2000 in Vienna and Budapest “with the aim of preserving the memories of the Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltics and the territory of the former Soviet Union, and making them available to the widest possible audience. ... The interviews were not recorded on video. Instead, we digitized more than 25,000 personal family photos and documents while recording the stories of the interviewees - 45,000 pages. The Centropa interviews were conducted between 2000 and 2009.” On: <https://www.centropa.org/hu/centroparol>.



He, together with his eldest cousin, who was also called László, went to Palestine. Márta: “I think he got to Haifa illegally on a Bulgarian ship. The ship was not allowed to dock, instead they were put in boats [to go ashore].” On landing, they came under fire. Laci ended up in the Saar Hanegev Kibbutz, [close to the present-day Gaza Strip], where he shortly worked as a policeman. “He really liked the kibbutz life, but his application for kibbutz membership was rejected.” Márta did not say why, but from later remarks one can guess that Laci got into one of his fights, and possibly was too fond of the glass to suit the strict morals of the kibbutzim.

But it was war, and he now became a volunteer in the 8th British Army to fight against Rommel in North Africa.

After the war he went to the officers' school in England. Here, in Cambridge, Laci got into contact with his sister in Hungary again, and learned that his parents had disappeared. Márta, looking back, said, “In 1944, [my father] was taken to Auschwitz, where no one saw him, because he was probably taken straight to the gas.”

This does not agree with Dora’s account, as she said that Laci joined the British army only after he had learned that his parents had died. But he got the news after the war, in 1945. His basic questions show the utter confusion and destruction that the war had brought, especially to the Jews.

Now an orphan, Laci slipped into a depression. “When the war ended, he decided not to become a military officer after all, he wanted to get out of the army. He drank and took drugs, so it was easy for him to get his discharge.” In these unsettled days he sought the company of Hungarians in London. There he met Ilona, who fell in love with him. And they married. Still, they were not long together. Already in 1946 each went their own way. Laci used his British travel papers to go to Brazil. Ilona, with a possible a stopover in Brazil, went to Canada. There she got a job in the

Brazilian embassy in Toronto. In Brazil, Laci's visa application for Canada was rejected. The couple was living apart now. In 1948, Laci returned to Hungary.

15. IX. 1945

No. B:13401

COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL DE LA CROIX-ROUGE
DÉLEGATION EN HONGRIE
 BUDAPEST

Demandeur **Feladó** Anfragesteller
GÖNDÖR

Nom — Családi név — Name: **GÖNDÖR**
 Prénom — Keresztnev — Vorname: **Márta**
 Rue — Utca — Strasse: **Bajza u. 26.**
 Localité — Város, község — Wohnort: **Budapest**
 Département — Megye — Komitat:
 Pays — Ország — Land: **Hungary**

Message à transmettre — Üzenet — Nachricht
 25 mots au maximum, nouvelles de caractère strictement personnel et familial. —
 Legfeljebb 25 szó, kizárólag személyi természetű. —
 Höchstens 25 Worte rein persönlichen Inhaltes.

Dear Laci! I was very glad about your handwritten letter. I am healthy and well. Playing in the music-orchestra of the city. Going to the artists academy. Parents were deported to Auschwitz. Their fate & whereabouts unknown. Waiting you very much. Love and kisses

Márta.

Date — Kelet: **Budapest, the 15. th. Sept, 1945.**

Destinataire — Címzett — Empfänger

Nom — Családi név — Name: **P/B294 Bdr. GÖNDÖR L.**
 Prénom — Keresztnev — Vorname: **No. I. Troop "D" Bty. /COAST/**
 Rue — Utca — Strasse: **R.A. Woolwich S.E. 18.**
 Localité — Város, község — Wohnort: **CAMBRIDGE, Barracks.**
 Département — Megye — Komitat:
 Pays — Ország — Land: **England**

Prière d'écrire très lisiblement — Réponse au verso.
 Gépirást kérünk, alírás lehet kézzel is! — Válasz a túoldalalon.
 Bitte deutlich zu schreiben! — Antwort auf der Rückseite.

Kedves Laciám!
 Most kaptam a "Hicem" utján a következő szövegű értesítéshazulról számokra:
 "Was interned for five month. During fascism was hiding at Waldbauers. Mothers deported no news about them. I am well. send answer.
 Márta Göndör, Bpest. VI. Bajza u. 26. /XI. Somloi ut 13. /
 Prof. Alf. Osszekötést teremteti.
 udy.
 Lorándt

This corroborates what Dora had told me in Seva Nilayam. "In '48 he went to Hungary to build socialism in Hungary. His wife did not trust it. He went alone. Lived in an expensive basement, and could get only factory work, although he spoke four languages. They told him: 'You were in the British Army, they influenced you with their ideology.'" Márta: "Laci first worked in foreign trade, then because of the constant threats – he was constantly suspected of spying for the British – he left it and avoided it as a factory worker trained in the Egyesült Izzó. He didn't like that very much."

“Excited and confused”

In 1952, Dora came to Hungary to work in the foreign languages section of Radio Budapest. She was 47, and this was a new start. She threw into her new life everything she had, placing her new experiences in more perspective by studying a wide range of sources. Her book *Window Onto Hungary* devoted some 95 pages to prewar Hungary, and covered the postwar period up to the revolt in another 89 pages. All of these were written with a good grasp of history. The kernel of the book, however, was the 121 pages on contemporary Hungary and the 1956 revolt. From that one chapter I had assumed that *Window onto Hungary* was a political book, a sober but deeply felt account of the political developments she had witnessed.



Benczur U 19, the radio headquarters. Now a hotel, aptly named the Radio Inn.

She had not, however, related all her experiences. People, in journo-speak “the sources”, had to be protected. In an earlier article, “A Bureau in Hungary”, she described how she preserved their anonymity. “I have been very careful not to mention any other persons who were there under the same conditions as myself. They – and they include many different nationalities – have taken their own decisions.”¹² That prevented her from showing individuals in her story. Yet it was her most intense time with Laci. Looking at *Window onto Hungary* from this perspective, her account gets another dimension. Laci is not mentioned by name, but he is very much present.

Freshly arrived at the Budapest Radio, she fell in with a marginal group, that could stand between her and the mass of Hungarian speaking people. She described it as “the Hungarian emigrants who came flocking back from the United States and Canada, from Britain, France and Belgium – old worker, socialists and trade unionists, who had been driven abroad by poverty, unemployment or political persecution.” (119)¹³ That was a carbon copy of the profile of Laci. Their message was not cheerful. It took Dora about a year, when it sank in; “discontent was universal” (128) Socialism

¹² Dora Scarlett, “A Bureau in Hungary”, in: *The New Reasoner*, Winter 1958-59, No 7, 52-61. p. 52.

¹³ The pages of *Window onto Hungary* referred to are given in brackets in the text.

in Hungary was not a people's choice. It was imposed by the Soviet Union. In practice therefore, socialist Hungary was ruled by petty bureaucrats. These were of two kinds. One, as Dora wrote, consisting of "ignoramuses, who happened to have the talent for distinguishing themselves at Party education classes, because they could remember texts. ... A very big premium is put on hypocrisy at all levels of the organisation." The other kind were the real powerbrokers: "it was in fact the tried and tested Party members ... many of whom have ... been ... in the Soviet Union before 1945 – who constituted the rock upon which one's best efforts foundered." The party ruled by fear, because it itself was afraid. "It came to power without the support of the majority, and has not been able to win them since, but has lost the support it had."¹⁴ There was little of socialism or affluence here, people told her.

Clearly, Dora needed a confidant:

"There was an enormous mismatch between official and private life." There was a large measure of thought control in it. There was one's security dossier. "Chance remarks over a cup of coffee, conversations held in private, could find their way into the dossiers – sometimes deliberately distorted - ... how easy it was for the system to be the vehicle of personal spite and revenge." (179)

Still, there was the prime need to access "the feelings of Hungarians in the present." Here, her knack of languages came to a rescue. "There was the barrier of a strange language...I wanted to understand the everyday speech around me." (122-123) It enabled her to get outside of her official role. That was a real effort, "a long process of enlightenment, which was difficult and painful." (130) She needed a bilingual (English Hungarian) teacher, was it Laci? She had told me, that he spoke four languages.

It paid off. "It was only by making friends outside my official capacity, that I was able to see how people lived, how homes were run, and to hear family histories". (128) There was a point at which I became "accepted; they showed confidence in me, and were willing to tell their own life stories and a good deal about the affairs of the country" (129). Dora was doing what a good anthropologist - or any successful immigrant - had to do.



Laci clearly trusted Dora. We find him in the *Window*, never mentioned by name, never in the full light. His troubles to find decent and affordable housing appeared in a general remark. "Plenty of 'protectio' [here: privilege] was necessary to get a flat. Housing had nowhere near caught up with the growth of Budapest. Many old houses were still privately owned, and there was sub-letting and sub-sub-letting at quite uncontrolled rents, so it came that people were paying three hundred forints a month for one room." (172) It was a big worry for his relations, too, as Márta remembered: "In 1948, my brother Laci arrived, who had nowhere to sleep in the small apartment.

¹⁴ "A Bureau in Hungary", 61; 55.

It was a small studio with a small stove in the hall, and the bathroom had a bath, sink and toilet. The neighbours had a bigger apartment, which included a servant's room, which they gave to Laci. ... Later, Laci moved into a sublet, so the servant's room was freed up."

There is some evidence that Dora stimulated Laci to go back to his literary ambitions. Márta: "After Stalin's death [1953] there was a slight relaxation, then he [Laci] entered the theatre world and became the librarian of the Theatre Association. He also used to give lectures about Shakespeare's plays."¹⁵

Being part of the group of returned émigrés had its drawbacks. Laci had his opponents here.¹⁶ But he stood his ground. Dora: "The Hungarians wanted him to divorce her. He refused to do that without talking to her." One might hazard the guess that Ilona was his emergency exit, a last resort, not to be given up easily.

In Hungary, as elsewhere, destalinisation had started with Khrushchev's speech on the cult of personality in February 1956. Now, in a political crisis – the old guard was still there - driven by hope, there was more emotional space. Laci was 43, and by now Dora was 51, an age in which love comes, if it comes at all, as an infatuation. She mentioned it in her *Memoir* in words that could be explained equally politically as personally: "a hopeful dream", "I was excited and confused."¹⁷

The two processes melted early. But never completely. Laci's past, and his family, pulled into another direction. Dora was not mentioned by Laci's sister, but Ilona was. Márta: "Ilona telegraphed to Laci from Canada in 1956 that "I love you and I'm waiting for you". Laci had had enough of being suspected of being a spy ... and was no longer an intellectual. [But] when in September 1956, he received a travel permit to get on a cruise to Vienna, he still came back."

There was a tremendous hope in the Hungarian political and social situation; a fruition of his dreams of a socialist society. Apparently, that hope – and Dora – was more important to him than a wife he had not seen in eight years.

Now this might have been the occasion to open up to each other. It is fair to assume that Dora, too, was held back, too, by the past. In the 1920s, long before Hungary, she had lived in Devonshire where she run a small farm by herself. There, as she wrote, "I let myself be led into some relationships which were not creditable to me or kind to others". That could easily have been with men who were married or at least engaged. Even the memory caused her shame.¹⁸ Moreover, in Hungary, with everybody spying on each other, the omnipresent Communist Party was a very moralising force. In addition to his fondness of the glass, the married status of Laci might well have counselled caution.

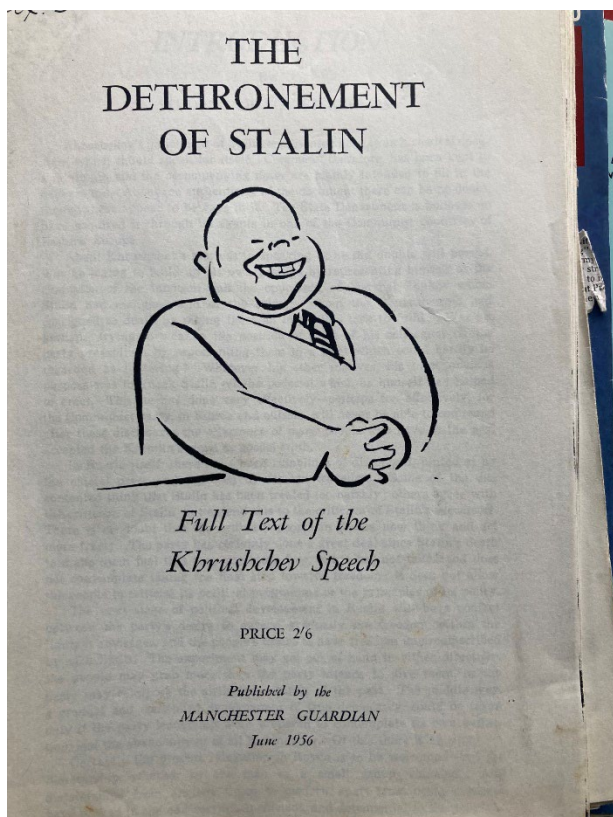
And importantly, could one find time to think? In Budapest, things were now moving at a break neck speed. Every few days the borders of the politically acceptable were shifted. One did not get time to breathe.

¹⁵ That library experience was to help Laci later to get the same work in Canada.

¹⁶ Dora to Laci, April 12, 1959. "I am sure that Mihaly was wrong when he thought you were no better than you were in Hungary."

¹⁷ *Memoir*: p. 68

¹⁸ *Love Made Visible*, 32-33.



Inside Hungary, the symbol of the destalinisation was László Rajk. He was not blameless in the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but was executed early enough (1949) to be a symbol of the promises of socialism. And he had been condemned by the Stalinists still in power. It took some months, but he was rehabilitated. On 6 October 1956, his body was dug up and re-interred.

“It was a sombre, gusty day. ... All morning endless crowds had filed past the coffins. They had not come in contingents, sent by their factories, as they did to other demonstrations, but individually and out of genuine feeling. ... Mrs. Rajk stood with the families of the other victims; a tall statuesque woman, she stood tearless, the head bare and her short grey hair blown by the wind.” (244).

That was not just a political observation. This was how a faithful wife should brave disaster. But Dora was not a wife.

Two weeks later, Imre Nagy was declared prime minister. The next day 24 October the radio premises were first taken over by the insurgents, then left empty. The foreign languages sections of the radio, where Dora worked, continued to hold meetings “so that we could ... decide on what line to take in our broadcasts when it was possible to resume them. The meetings were sterile, almost farcical. The leadership had no ideas to offer besides calling the insurgents fascists, and they were obviously getting more and more frightened and unsure of themselves.” (266)

Expectation and fear crept everywhere. “On Thursday November 1st, a friend came to me and said: “Don’t be alarmed, but my uncle has just come in from the country, and he says that the Soviet tanks have gone no further than Vecses (a village nine miles out of Budapest) and they have turned round and taken up positions facing the city.”” (288)

“Friday, November 2nd, was All Souls’ Day ... In this year 1956 it became a day of national mourning. ... I had not remembered the date when I walked home along the Körut after dusk on Thursday. ... More and more candles began to glow, on the window ledges, on the graves, in front of the street corner shrines, and in the churches, where vast numbers of people were coming and going, and kneeling in prayer. I realised that I was witnessing a city in mourning, and the solemnity and exaltation of that vigil descended on me.” (290) Everybody felt that the countdown had started. Officially there was still hope, and as people do, they preferred to make plans for the immediate future rather than face disaster.

The next evening, Saturday November 3, “I visited a friend who was in an important position in the ‘Egyesült Izzó’ (Tungstram Lamp) factory, one of the most important in Budapest, and he told me that his first job on Monday would be to work out a constitution for the factory which would

maintain it as a public property with workers' control." (294). This slightly eccentric mention was actually a deeply felt memory. Laci worked in the Egyesült Izzó. It was Dora's last evening with Laci.

"My last thought as I fell asleep that night was of what I intended to say at the meeting. At five o'clock in the morning I was awakened by the distant sound of heavy guns." On the radio, there was a short announcement by prime minister Imre Nagy. "Then the radio was silent. The gunfire came steadily nearer. (298-299)



Hungarian Freedom Fighters during revolution against Soviet backed communist government.
<https://vintagenewsdaily.com>

"The radio continued, day after day, to pour out appeals to go back to work Every day the strike became more solid. Everyone walked; all the main streets were crowded. ... more and more poems were appearing – true to the Hungarian revolutionary tradition – and sometimes in the gathering dusk you would see a knot of people, and go up to find out what was happening; they would be reading a new poem, and some of them would be using the last light of the November day to copy it into their notebook." (308, 309)

Dora's work had basically stopped. The last meeting of the Radio Revolutionary Council, which she attended was on Friday, November 9th." (310)

The flight

"For three weeks I had not worked. ... But now I had come to the end. I still did not want to leave the country, but I could not bring myself to go back to the radio." (311) Dora's residence permit would expire at the end of December. She went to the British Legation to explain her position. "I was at once offered hospitality and the chance of leaving by lorry in the next convoy going out. I wrote a letter of resignation to the Radio ... I could not find anyone to present the letter to, so I simply left it behind.

"On Saturday, November 10th, I took such of my belongings as I could carry and went out of my flat for the last time." (313) Among this was "My typewriter, which I bought from a Communist Party organiser about 1945, and which was old then, and which went with me to Hungary, and

was [now] brought back, although I had to leave most of my clothes and books to do so, as we could only take what we ourselves could carry.”¹⁹

“It was not till the following Thursday that the convoy could go out. During those days I went out into the city as usual, returning to the delegation at night.

“Then came the first news of the deportations. ... At first the reports were received with some reserve ... But some young people I knew, who were either working as translators at the Radio, or had worked there at some time, and who were of Hungarian descent but born in Canada, came into the office of the Legation. They were trying to get exit visas; they were in panic because they had seen people picked up for deportation.” (313) They must have given Dora some news about Laci. But as she said to me in Seva Nilayam: “He got no help from the British Embassy.” And it is unlikely they even met there. Laci might well have been fighting.

“On the morning of November 15th our convoy left. I sat in a covered lorry with seventeen other people, all holders of British or dominions passports ... All along the road we overtook people walking in the same direction; they were on their long trek to the frontier. They waved to us, and our driver waved back. ... But it was with a sore heart I passed them by.” (315).

One of these walkers was – or would soon be - Laci Göndör.

“My only window on the world was a tiny square opening in the canvas, and I had to bend nearly double to see out of this. But I wanted to look as long as I could.”

“Near the frontier the roads were deserted; the town of Magyaróvár, scene of the first massacre by the AVO, seemed empty and dead. Only an odd cart or two, driven by old peasants, rumbled over the cobbles, and geese paddled in the mud. The refugees had taken to the fields, and were waiting till nightfall. ... It looked as if life had come to a standstill, and only the drizzling rain fell incessantly on the bare strips of farm land from which the last crops had long been gathered.

At this point I concluded my story.” (316)

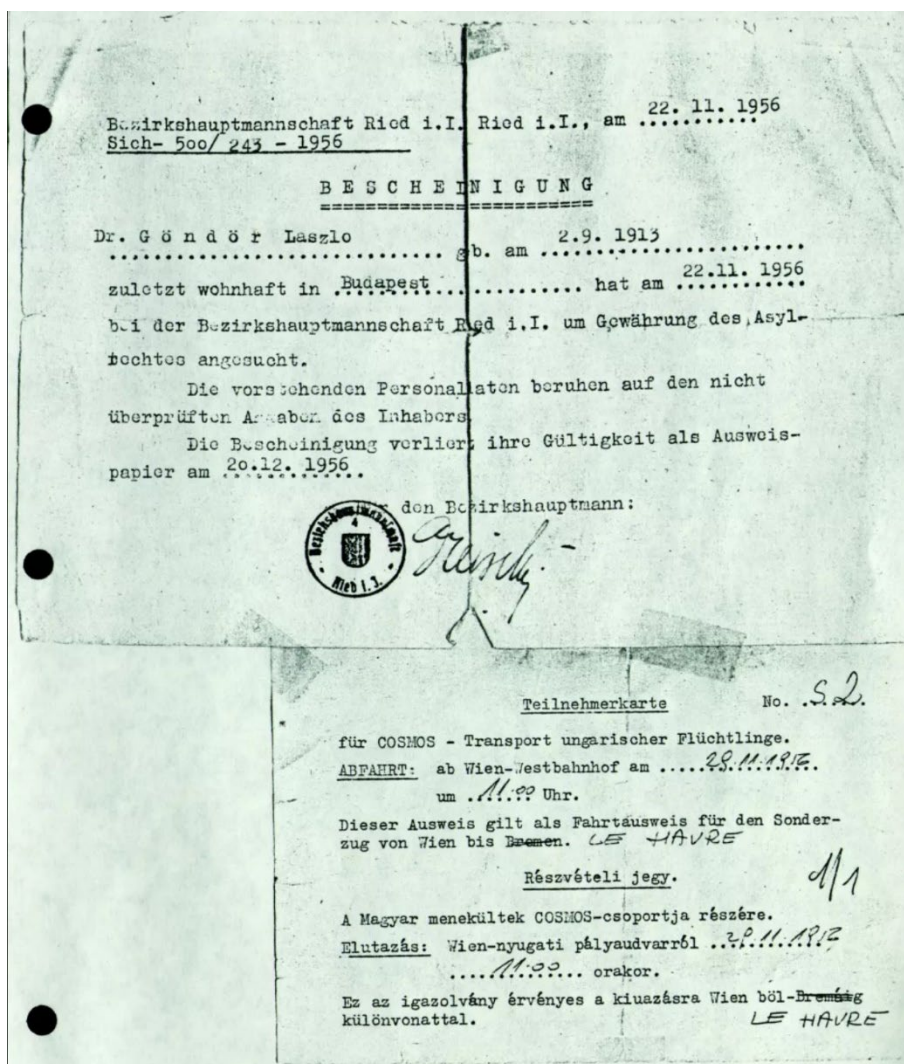
It was shattering experience – and it gave the title to her book.

Dora was in the truck, but Laci was not so lucky, and he walked. Dora: “He walked 300 miles to Vienna.” In the end, they were not in it in the same way. Dora had some security. As Graham Greene expressed it, unlike the locals, she had a return ticket.²⁰ Laci had not; he had to use his own feet.

Márta: “In November 1956, after the Russians came back, he went to Vienna again. There he applied for asylum as a "freedom fighter". On 22 November 1956, Laci got asylum in Vienna. He ended up in a refugee camp, from where he contacted the Canadian embassy. Ilona was faithfully waiting for him there.”

¹⁹ A further undated 1974 letter to Laci.

²⁰ Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*, 1955, reprinted 1977, London: Penguin Books, p. 95.



Márta: “These two papers are related to the defection of my brother, Laci Göndör. With the paper above, he was allowed to cross into Austria in 1956, and the paper below proved that he was granted asylum.”

A return to Hungary was impossible. On 22 November 1956 Nagy was arrested. Laci left for Le Havre on 28 November 1956, from where he took a ship to Canada.

It felt as a defeat. The pain was still in Dora’s voice during that talk in Seva Nilayam in 1990: “Met his wife again.”

When Dora had not come forward, Canada really was Laci’s only option. It was not a gateway to heaven, though. Said Márta, “They wanted a child, but to Ilona's great pain, it never came. His last job was in Toronto, ... a librarian.”

“You have to write it down”

When Dora came back to England, she was 51. She was staying with people, picking up the pieces, meeting old acquaintances from the communist party. Mentally more in Hungary than in the UK. “The memory is still fresh and is indelible,” wrote Dora.²¹ “My feet ached, but my heart ached more.”²²

²¹ *Memoir*: p 75.

²² *Memoir*: p 98

Nobody could write about it like her. Dora: There was one Charlie Coutts, but “it was not it. He was still in the middle of it and wanted to adapt.” He worked in a youth international office in Budapest. He did not speak the language or mixed with the ordinary people. Moreover, he failed to see the extent of the uprising and, importantly, the support the peasantry gave to the reforms.²³

But 1956 was more. Dora had spent nearly four years in Hungary, socialising with this new people and language as much as she could. That, as anthropologists know, amounted to a new birth. She was a bit over 47 when she came, and was 51 when she left. She knew she had been the witness. “Sometimes history brings you in the circumstance that you have to write it down,” she told me. Dora had a job in a shop but that stopped her from writing. Luckily, she met Ralph Russel, a former colleague from the Communist Party, but also an Urdu scholar teaching at SOAS, London. He invited her to live with his family.²⁴ Now having the time, Dora spent nearly all her savings on writing and finally published her book in 1959. The cost of saying goodbye to a life in the movement.

It had been a strain: “try to relax”, she mentored me when I talked about my own writing – always too slow to my taste. “Relax when you write; this is important. Do not overreach yourself.”

As we have seen, she did not mention individuals, least of all individuals who might have been important to her. Later, she acknowledged that the reason was also inside herself. “I have an objection to magnifying one’s private emotions and displaying them to the public.”²⁵ Thus, Dora protected her sources – but in the process was hiding the very inspiration that would have given her book emotional depth.

Although the book was well written, it turned out to be a shot into an empty field. Peter Fryer praised it as “The best book yet on Hungary’s revolt. ... For all its austerity of its duplicated pages [it] stands head and shoulder above ... any other eye witness account of the uprising and its suppression that exists in England”. For three reasons. It was the result of mature reflection, it was solidly factual, and thirdly, she understood and spoke the language very well indeed.²⁶ Make no mistake. *Window onto Hungary* is a superb reportage of the Hungarian revolt; at the same time, it gives solid background. It could have been written only by somebody who was a good observer, was intelligent, and was involved. It far surpasses the abstract radicalism which is bon ton in academia today. But as it turned out, Dora was hiding herself and Laci in vain. Because, politically, the project was a failure. “Not a morsel of her evidence found reflection in the statement [on the Hungarian Uprising, issued by the CPGB on December 15-16, 1962].²⁷

The book did not sell. “As you know *Window onto Hungary* had a poor chance and I had to get it published by a small private firm which then disappeared because the owner died, and I couldn’t

²³ Dora Scarlett, 1957. “I was in Hungary too, Mr. Coutts.” in: *The Tribune Magazine*, 25 January 1957.

²⁴ Personal communication, Marion Molteno. She holds the archive of the late Ralph Russell (1918-2008) and is the editor of Ralph Russell, *A Thousand Yearnings, A book of Urdu Poetry and Prose*, 2008, New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing. It is one of the best anthologies of Urdu literature and contains splendid translations of Russell’s favourite poets Mir (1723-1810) and Ghalib (1797-1869).

²⁵ Dora to Laci, 7-1-77.

²⁶ *Newsletter*, vol. 3, no 86, January 19-24, 1959, pp. 28-29. Peter Fryer (1927-2006) could enter in Hungary in October-November 1956 as a correspondent for the communist *Daily Worker*. He wrote the book *Hungarian Tragedy*, published already in December 1956, and left the CPGB. When writing this review, he was editor of the Trotskyist weekly *Newsletter*, published from London.

²⁷ *Newsletter*, vol. 3, no 86, January 19-24, 1959, pp. 28-29

even get back the stock in hand. But I happen to know it is still circulating and being read and I still hear from people about it.”²⁸ The assets were taken over by another firm in Bradford. “No letters were answered. So, I have now dismissed the whole matter.”²⁹

Little wonder then, that tempers between Dora and Laci flared, even if not for long. “I meant to try to help you even when I wanted to break off our correspondence, as I hope you understand.”³⁰

Dora had published her book; and done everything she could to promote it. There was nothing left now but a drab life in London. As she told me, she discussed her political future with her friend Ralph Russell, who said with a sense of drama, “You should wait till they expel you.” But he also gave her the idea of going to India. There, Dora had one name only, a former English communist writer in Madras. So, Tamil Nadu it was. She took with her one copy of *Window onto Hungary*, and her old typewriter.³¹ She went out by boat, the Dutch steamer *Oranje*.³²

The meanings of home

Now at 54 in a country she had never really considered before, Dora with great perseverance created a new space for herself in India. Here, the past receded and at times reasserted itself. Hungary became Laci. The surviving letters between the two are snippets of conversation.³³ Still one can see a definite trajectory.

In the first phase, Dora was still in Devon. She acted like a counsellor to Laci: “About your plans, I don’t know what to say. Do what is best for your happiness, whether it is here or over there. I do want your happiness very much indeed, and you can rely on that, always. It would be good to be able to talk, because letters are insufficient. I would know better than if I could help you, and how. But that may not be possible before I go to India... I am sure that Mihaly [apparently a common friend] was wrong when he thought you were no better than you were in Hungary. I can tell from your letters that you are very different now. I think a great deal of you, and of your perseverance and integrity, and always shall, whatever happens.”³⁴

She enquired after Laci’s sister Márta who in her mind was related to a disturbed period for Laci in Hungary. And for Laci, Dora wrote: “And are you seeing things any clearer yourself. I hope you are well.”³⁵

²⁸ 8-9-1975

²⁹ 21-4-64 Seva Nilayam.

³⁰ 12-4-1959

³¹ 1974, no date.

³² My later supervisor Chris Baks would be on the same ship in 1962.

³³ There are some 54 letters left in copies and in transcript. The first is dated April 12, 1959, the last October 21, 1982. There is a gap between May 1965 and April 1970.

³⁴ 12-4-1959

³⁵ 10-8-59 from London

“No idea of the meaning of anything”

Late in 1959, Dora arrived in India. She made some light-hearted fun of Laci: “It is perhaps unsuitable to wish you a very happy New Year since you say you are hibernating ... anyway I hope that the New Year ... will benefit you in whatever way you most need, and lead towards the time when you come out of hibernation.” But there was some problem. Laci was not good in expressing himself. At least to Dora. “I was very glad to get your letter and thank you for your good wishes. I’m afraid I must give up hope of the long letter you promised to send.”³⁶ Obviously, Laci was disoriented and depressed.

Dora did not exchange Hungary for India. India was cheap, but she was not enchanted with its culture and social behaviour. A visit to a temple turned out to be strange. “I had no idea of the meaning of anything and it all looked rather forbidding and even horrible, except that I could sense that the people were very much at home here.”³⁷ The Indian ways and philosophy were not to her taste. Dora wrote “I am an European, and experience forces on me the belief that the European way of doing things is vastly superior to the Indian. I used to think that such a belief comes from reactionary politics, but now I have no politics at all. ... I don’t think it [India] is the right country to settle in; one either has to turn to one of the Eastern philosophies, or to be a missionary, to live with any spiritual comfort.”³⁸

Things did not work out well in the first aid post in the village of Mudichur. For the ladies of the NGO, it was a mere pastime. “What is most distressing here is that whatever you do make a place attractive and useful, people will let it go to ruin, or deliberately ruin it, unless you keep a constant watch over it.” And Dora would like to see something more permanent coming out of her efforts: “I think this is only human – I put a lot of work into Radio Budapest and everything was wiped out. I would like to feel I am not always a wanderer”. Indeed, she got flashbacks to Hungary. Still, “I would like you to see this place ... how good it would be to talk to you instead of writing.”³⁹

And after some time in Mudichur, she wrote on 10 March 1962, a surprising letter. Apparently, Laci had written that he got a Canadian passport; his marriage was in serious trouble, and he would like Dora come and visit him in Canada. Dora’s answer was stand-offish: “The main thing is that you mustn’t blame yourself about your marriage. Eight years’ separation, eight years’ life to make people grow apart.”

Given what she would tell me nearly thirty years later, the next remark was surprising: “I always thought that your wife should have come to Hungary, but I haven’t felt it was my business to say so. However mistaken you were in going, however great the loss in security and outward prosperity, you would have had the sharing of those bitter experiences. I hope you will settle down ... without self-criticism.” But, “I also hope you will come to India when you feel able.”⁴⁰

³⁶ 30-12-1959

³⁷ 20-11-71.

³⁸ 30-12-1960

³⁹ 15-10-1961, Muduchur (Mudichur)

⁴⁰ 10-3-1962, Muduchur (Mudichur)

From this letter it appeared that Dora was at ease with Laci being in Canada and her being in India – although a face-to-face talk would have been nice. Not a thing that would set a man’s heart on fire.



Laci’s residence, Toronto. Google Maps.

Two weeks later, it again appeared that Laci was not at ease. India seemed so strange, so poor. How could Dora live a decent life there? Why not try Canada?

Dora explained in more detail: “My dear Laci, you have no need to write in such concern. ... Life is very pleasant in these places.... But I am not intending to stay in India permanently. I think sooner or later I will feel the need of taking up the threads of western life again.” And as for coming to Canada: “I can’t just “try” Canada – the immigration authorities would want a lot more satisfaction than that. Unless my book brings me a lot of money I can’t afford to come and visit. ... I can easily earn enough to keep myself here, but my bank balance is about static [Still], if you can find out the exact conditions of entry into Canada, and let me know, that will be one way of helping me to decide the next steps.”

Apparently, Laci had even offered to pay all or part of the travel expenses. But this, again, was used against his wish of meeting in Canada. “When you have saved some more money, what is to prevent you coming [here] too? Travel in India is very cheap.”⁴¹

“An answer to a deeply-felt need”

⁴¹ 26-3-1962, Muduchur (Mudichur)

In June 1962, Dora arrived in the place that would become Seva Nilayam. Her wavering was over. She was elated.

“I am writing this letter sitting on a rock in a sandy river surrounded by wild, craggy hills! Please, set your mind at rest. I think about you often, and nothing effaces my friendship for you... I have felt a need in myself and found an answer here. I don't know what the future will bring and I don't think I shall regret it.”⁴²

For buying the land and build a house, though, Dora's financial means did not suffice. Once she mentioned this, to build a house, to get some land, she gets financial support from Laci.⁴³ That was a self-denying act. Now there was no chance he could meet Dora. And he remained very reticent about his emotional life. Dora wanted to ease that: “Just write from time to time, and if you feel like saying anything try to do so without thinking too much about it. ... I know you well enough to feel in touch even if you don't say anything particular, yours ever, Dora.”⁴⁴

Very soon, however, Laci is confronted with a new reality. Other people from Canada are able to visit Dora – and one of them even knows him by sight.

“Soon after receiving your letter I had a visitor here – a young Canadian teacher who is doing some voluntary work in India ... Well, this young man, ... Tom Schatzky,⁴⁵ thinks he know you, as [a member] of the North York Library. He also knows Willowdale. He does not expect you to remember him... Tom Schatzky will probably be back in Canada by Christmas, and he will look you up ...”

Ouff that hurts. But Dora assured Laci that Hungary is still in her mind, comparing it favourably with India. She had found in India “an intellectual deadness that is disturbing ... Love of knowledge for its own sake, or real thinking, the struggle of ideas, seems non-existent. ... Still, there's a lot to be said for India. How are you? Yours, Dora”⁴⁶

Lacy needed some more conviction, it seems. In two months, Dora reiterated her plans - or rather, lack of plans. “You ask whether I have any plans, any thoughts of moving on or settling down. Well, it's hard to make plans very far ahead ... It is impossible for me to just walk out of it [the work] here.”⁴⁷ A few months later, she was more candid. Leaving her work for any period of time, would be to destroy it. In the midst of millions of people, it was the outsider that kept this local medical relief going. She wrote with great foresight, “But you can't, in India, start something which is needed ... and hand it over to the locality to keep it going! It will be used for something remote from its original purpose, or not used at all.” She missed a general purpose in India: “I would like to feel I was taking part in however minute a degree, in the development of a hopeful country, a country with great possibilities. But I don't know what the future of this country can be.” As if to prove her point, she incurred Indian quietism: “Krishnamurthy would say, it is not necessary to know. We have to act exactly the same whether we have influence on the life of one person or of thousands – even if we apparently influence no one at all.”⁴⁸

⁴² 24-6-1962 Keeraipothumpetta (Keeraipothumpatti)

⁴³ letters of 19-1, 19-2, and 20-3 1963

⁴⁴ 20-4-63

⁴⁵ “Tom Schatzky, May 17, 1939 - October 11, 2018”, Obituary, 15 October 2018, in the *Ottawa Citizen*, <https://ottawacitizen.remembering.ca/obituary/tom-schatzky-1070661060>.

⁴⁶ 21-6-1963

⁴⁷ 3-12-1963

⁴⁸ 21-3-1964

In the middle of these pretty dark musings, living conditions for Dora improved. The new house, gave her some privacy. It must have felt like a home, like finally settling down.

“As regards our own premises, I have managed to get a little privacy, and to preserve a few belongings. I no longer find five or six people sleeping on the verandah and they don’t spit around the front door, but it is a constant fight.”⁴⁹

The main problem of living in Seva Nilayam remained an unbridgeable cultural distance to the people in the area. Politics do not help. “We had as you know big riots in all big cities of South India. I sympathise very fully with the Tamil people. ... It is a very beautiful place and I have got deeply involved in work for the village people.” Still, it was not the Indians that fulfilled her social and cultural needs: “We have a good circle of foreign friends, some volunteer workers.” A paradox, but “If you saw the ignorance, need and misery here you would understand better than I can tell you.”⁵⁰

“Don’t cling to a house, if it’s not a home”

After this, there was a long break in the correspondence. The next letter came after nearly five years, dated 8 March 1970: “What a surprise! Yes, I am still here. ... You say nothing about your life. What work are you doing? Still librarian? Are you with your wife? When you write again, tell me some more details. I am quite well, and I am happy here If it were not for all this [here], I would much like to see you. Meanwhile, I hope you will write again.”

In May that year we get one of the reasons of this long silence. Laci had to overcome cancer. And now he had set his mind on revisiting Hungary.⁵¹ Within two years, he wrote he was contemplating divorce. Dora was not opposed to the idea. But Hungary was far from her mind.

“I thank you for the very informative letter about your visit to Hungary and also for the greetings from old friends. ...

About your personal dilemma it is hard for [me] to comment, but I should think you ought not to cling to a house if it is not a home. You are in effect as much of a “vagabond” as if you had left.” Here, Dora was quoting Laci, and touching his big fear, to be without a home.

“Whether there would ever be any chance of your finding a meeting ground with your wife, it is impossible for me to know. It would seem not, if you haven’t found it in all these years. But you know best. ... I have a strong feeling that you ought to start a new life. It isn’t impossible.”⁵²

And a few weeks later, “It seems a sad ending to have to part after your wife waiting for you through the years you were in Hungary, and welcoming you back at last. But on the other hand, if a relationship is dead, you can’t pretend it is alive. If you cling to the house just for ease and convenience you will hurt your self-respect, which is more important than a roof.” Again, Dora took recourse to some preaching. Ilona should see “the futility of letting social conventions overshadow the important matters of existence. ... the same sun is reflected whole and entire in

⁴⁹ 21-3-1964

⁵⁰ 2-5-1965 Seva Nilayam

⁵¹ 9-5-1970

⁵² 22-8-1972

every drop. If one could really see this, all personal animosities would vanish. . . . the essential light is there even in a thief or a drunkard. I don't know what else to say, except that I wish you peace and even happiness although you may not think that possible.”⁵³

Apparently, that letter put an end to even the speculation that Dora and Laci would ever meet again.

“Something in me”

The next few years, Dora's autobiography seemed the main topic. When she came to the part on Hungary, she discovered she had said it all in *Window onto Hungary*. She did not want to make a shortened version of it but the political and social complications needed to be explained.⁵⁴ That suggests little development *in rebus politicis* with Dora, but now she became, perhaps for the first time to Laci, critical of the movement of 1956 in Hungary, indeed, of top-down development in general, also in India. “I was entirely on the side of the insurgents because they were fighting against something intolerable. But what were they fighting for? To be like Britain and America? . . . To go to India relieved the strain, but raised many further problems. India is in a mess. . . . I think I have hit on a great truth – that when you try and work for socialism you find you are getting a modern version of slavery.”⁵⁵

Like Gandhi before, for an antidote against top-down modernism she took recourse to the unchanging village (itself, by the way, a British discovery). “But India (rural India, which is most of it) lives much as it did when one set of conquerors after another appeared in the place, but the same oxen draw water from the same wells and the same carts take the produce to market. It is this that keeps India alive not the [modern] government officers which are inefficient, lazy and corrupt.”⁵⁶

Still, her autobiography would be worthwhile: “I think I can express my attitude like this: there is a lot in my life that nobody else knows about; I think it has some value. . . . I think if I can write things down myself, then anybody who is interested can get the information they want.”

Apparently, Laci was still awestruck at Dora's writing skills, though he expressed it as self-criticism. Dora tended to brush these doubts off. “I don't know why you are worrying about not being able to express yourself in sufficiently literary English if you write to me – You could probably convey your meaning, and that would be enough.”⁵⁷

Both authors went through a rough patch, a writers' block with Laci, and a dismissive attitude to Dora's memoirs from the side of a prospective publisher. “What happened to your writing on librarianship? I was expecting a further instalment.” And what followed was a disturbingly honest reflection on her own writing:

“You may say, what happened to my autobiography. Well, I will answer that. People have said that it isn't really an autobiography because it isn't self-revelatory enough, and they are right. I

⁵³ 11-9-1972

⁵⁴ 18-11-1973; 14-7-1974.

⁵⁵ 22-9-1974

⁵⁶ No date, 1975.

⁵⁷ Received 24-12-1975

have a bit of feeling against too much revelation, and it is always there and hampers me. There are a lot of autobiographies published which are very trivial and I have an objection to magnifying one's private emotions and displaying them to the public.⁵⁸

As we know now, Dora did not change her style and did not finish her autobiography,

With age came health issues and retirement. The last four years of the correspondence were filled with these. "... much relieved that your operation was quite successful, I hope you will continue to write every month & I promise to reply a little more promptly. I hope you can enjoy the enforced leisure & I suppose the release from strain of your job."⁵⁹

After this, there seems to have been a winding up. Dora now confessed she was out of tune with the new generation of visitors. If only Laci would be here ...

"It is too easy to travel to India now. I came at a time when it was a considerable undertaking. I came by ship but now everybody flies. Young people with big new brightly coloured waterproof rucksacks keep coming in, either having written first or not written at all. ... These people are very sincere, very well mannered, eager to please & to learn & see something of India. But they seem to know so little that it is impossible to talk much besides trivialities. ... So affluent they can skim the surface of life. ... I can't help to feel a kind of resentment that they should be just floating around India, enjoying life, & going back with the prestige of having seen India. It is perhaps unfair of me."⁶⁰

In the final end, writing was no substitute for company.

"I have an eye defect which makes much reading difficult. I had an attack of herpes It left an opaque spot in my eye & this results in letters looking distorted when I read. ... I can only think of your coming here & discussing it verbally."

And really to remember together what had been in those tragic days in Hungary that were the halcyon days of Dora's and Laci's relation.

"I love India but I am sometimes nostalgic for Hungary. Sometimes some memory or other will come like a flash, very vividly, & I have no idea what causes it. I might suddenly see Tihany, or be on one of the old paddle boats full of peasants, or see the cobbled streets in old Buda. It is quite different from recalling facts & thinking about them."⁶¹

In the autumn of 1982 developments in Eastern Europe, however distant, made her nostalgic.

"I am thinking constantly about Poland & "Solidarity". The courage of the Poles is so moving. I only get news from the Guardian Weekly but some of the articles are very good, & knowledge of what it is like to live under such conditions fills the gap. ... I feel nostalgia for Europe & all of European culture & political conflict but not for Britain which seems in deplorable state But I am happy in India & love life here, it is just that Poland speaks to something in me."⁶²

There were no more letters and time went on, also in Europe. The events of 1989 were, after all, in a series: 1953 (Berlin), 1956 (Budapest, of course), 1968 (Prague), 1982 (Gdansk).

⁵⁸ 7-1-77

⁵⁹ 14-3-1978

⁶⁰ 17-11-1979

⁶¹ 26-6-1982

⁶² 21-10-1982



Dora Scarlett 1990

“The way people’s lives were cut”

So, in February 1990, we were sitting in the tropical afternoon, finishing that small bottle of Dowager whiskey. Dora still spoke:

“I would have been the right companion for him.

“These last few months I could visualise what happened in Eastern Europe. I had seen the places. It was very moving. When Imre Nagy was reburied [16 June 1989], I was more in Hungary than in India.

“I could never talk about this. It is impossible to tell people here, who are only interested in Tamil Nadu, to young people in Europe, what Europe went through. The way people’s lives were cut.”

I was profoundly moved. For me, the end of socialism in Eastern Europe was a confirmation and a liberation. For Dora it was a final farewell. In silence we stared at the red Bougainvillea flowers in front of us.

Dora was sitting hunched in the fading light. When I dared to look at her, she looked up. Her cheeks were wet.

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Now, thinking back, I feel Dora knew.

Laci had died a few months earlier. His sister Márta: “He visited home in 1989. He had always wanted to die here, and so it happened. He simply passed away in his sleep in the rented apartment.” His revolution had succeeded, but he never had a house that he could call his home.