

# Personal Papers

## Budapest to Britain, 1956

PETER MEISNER

In October 1956 I had just started my third year as a medical student in Budapest. On 23 October we students gathered by the statue of the famous Hungarian poet Petöfi on the left bank of the Danube and marched peacefully to demonstrate our sympathy with the Polish students and to be addressed by famous writers and poets demanding greater freedom. On our way back we were told that on his return from a state visit to Yugoslavia the communist prime minister had denounced our demonstration as fascist. In the evening I attended a medical meeting at the university; there were sounds of shooting and bleeding demonstrators were brought in from the nearby radio building, where the secret police had opened fire. The Hungarian army arrived with tanks but chose to support the people rather than the secret police. The crowd pulled down the colossal statue of Stalin and by morning the regime had fallen.

These were heady days. Imre Nagy, a popular patriotic communist, formed a revolutionary government but day by day the people demanded more and more: neutrality, the opening up of international trade, freedom of the press, and the end of the one party system were the aims, and just before the Soviet tanks crushed the revolution the new government identified itself with them.

### Arrival in Vienna

When I arrived in Vienna gunfire was still ringing in my ears, together with the desperate plea broadcast to the United Nations by the prime minister. I had never been outside Hungary, and Austria appeared a haven of peace. Vienna in full splendour, with its royal palaces, churches, and buildings, seemed a long way away from the tanks in Hungary. Clearly I was not going to return; I registered as a medical student, although I had no idea how I would finance myself. In the next few days Vienna became saturated with Hungarians and the international rescue operation started, the Americans, the Germans, the Swiss all offering help. I was interviewed by the British Council and offered a place at a British medical school with a scholarship and the right to settle in Britain. After accepting the first thing I did was to purchase an umbrella as I knew all English gentlemen carried one; unfortunately I bought a practical, collapsible one, only to discover on arrival that this was not the type the British favoured. Next day with 24 other Hungarian students I boarded a military Viscount at Schwechat airport and flew to Blackbushe airport. As the first planeload of Hungarian refugees to arrive we were given a warm welcome by the British Council and put up at the Lancaster Gate Hotel. (One of our number, who was still

wearing the mud stained clothing in which he had crossed the border, was so acclimatised that he ordered breakfast in bed.) We were given £2 each, and you can get some idea of the value of this when you realise that then you could send 60 letters to Europe for half that sum.

London on 27 November was mild, pleasant, and civilised. I could walk without an overcoat and on the first morning Professor Cushing, professor of Hungarian at London University, was invited to explain things. Max Hayward, a linguist, who was our other interpreter and had helped the British Council to interview us in Vienna, had reputedly taught himself Hungarian in three weeks.

### London and Oxford

Invitations flowed in. The three medical students were invited for dinner by a lady doctor and her journalist husband. As my fellow students spoke no English I had to hold the fort. It must have been frustrating for them, as one of them was delighted to stop my flow of talk by telling me that my flies were undone. The kind lady doctor and her niece, a medical student, took us around London a day or two later.

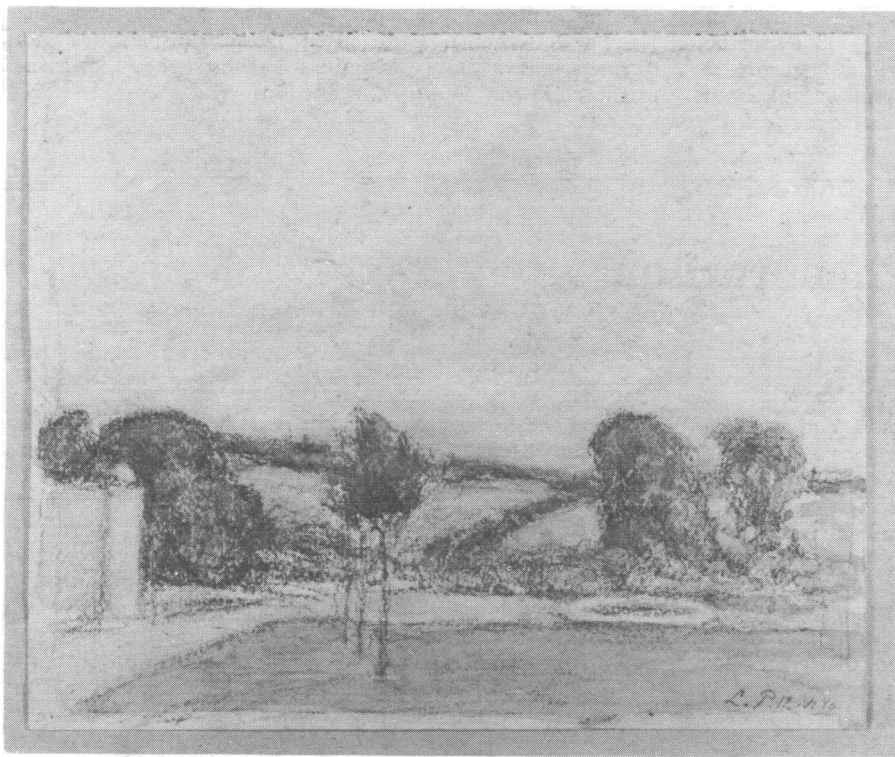
Because of a misunderstanding I was the only one of our party to turn up at the English lesson arranged for us by the British Council. I had a private lesson by four or five frustrated teachers, who taught me not to use my favourite expression, "of course," as this appeared rude the way I used it. I learnt how to pronounce Gloucester, Leicester, and Tottenham. That night we were given dinner by the Women's Voluntary Service. In Hungary most dishes contain paprika and are therefore red: we were given "English" curry, which was greenish yellow and we were slow to eat it. When encouraged to do so one of us said, "We had tea, so we are not so angry." I hope his slip of the tongue did not upset the good ladies.

My mother's cousin, who had settled in England before the war, discovered me on my third day and she and her husband took me home to dinner. They gave me an excellent meal and some useful tips: not to gesture while speaking, to sit straight, and to hold my fork "upside down." I soon mastered the art. The following day we left London for Oxford. Our friends from the British Council all stood there with their thumbs up as our coach pulled away from the hotel, and we were sorry to leave them all behind. The first night in Oxford was spent in a cold youth hostel in Headington—a strong contrast to the hotel. On the first morning a tall young man appeared and handed over some 20 pairs of nearly new shoes, admonishing me not to take the best pair as the interpreter's due. When he left I learnt that he was the Duke of Kent. Fortunately our stay in the youth hostel was short and we were all taken in by families. I spent my first week in a splendid tall Victorian house on St Margaret's Road as a guest of the philosopher Richard Hare. He and his family made me feel very much at home.

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## Another exile in Oxford



Seeking for a suitable illustration to Dr Peter Meisner's article, we remembered that about 20 years beforehand the distinguished painter, Leonid Pasternak, had sought refuge in Oxford. His daughter, Josephine, who still lives in Oxford, kindly gave us permission to use a pastel of a scene on the outskirts of the city and has also written this note about her parents.—Ed, *BMJ*.

We first visited Oxford in 1936, when my father, mother, and I stayed with my sister Lydia, who while working in the same laboratory in Munich had met the psychiatrist Dr Eliot Slater and married him. We were, however, living in Germany until 1939, when (as my father's memoirs' state) "There were rumours, which proved to be well founded, that all Soviet citizens, without exception, were being expelled from Germany, and that the authorities were working through the alphabet."

We moved to Oxford in May 1939, but my mother died in August. Each week my father, sister, and I used to go to the crematorium, on the outskirts of the city, and in the garden of rest talk and recall the past as if mother was still with us. The study of this part of Oxford (shown in this illustration) is Leonid Pasternak's tribute to her memory.

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Oxford was easy to love: I became used to lunching and dining in Balliol, Oriel, and Queen's Colleges and a number of students generously took us out for meals in restaurants. Somerville gave us Sunday afternoon tea—which turned out to be an extremely pleasant tea dance. I was presented to Sir Hans Krebs, who kindly inquired after some of my teachers in Budapest. We all carried an identification label, which indicated that if we were in trouble Miss Norah Beloff should be telephoned. After a week in the philosopher's house it was discovered that a philosophy student was staying in a doctor's house, so he and I swapped. My host was Dr Sheila Callender, the distinguished Oxford physician, who lived in a lovely stone cottage in Upper Wolvercote at the top of the Woodstock road. Through Sheila I could visit the hospital, and I remember being shown a case of gas gangrene which, I was reassured, did not often occur in this country. I was also given a couple of tickets to the Crazy Gang and one of the Somerville girls kindly accompanied me. English humour did seem different.

### From Oxford to Newcastle

In the meanwhile a lot of work went into sorting out our future. I was told that I had a place at the medical school in Newcastle upon Tyne. Once more I felt insecure, but Sheila assured me that I would find Newcastle very pleasant and that she had friends there. I was invited for Christmas by my London cousin and the capital seemed glorious with its Christmas decorations; my second cousin, aged 16 and just back from boarding school, was only too happy to discover London with me. It was enjoyable to discover the collections at the National and Tate Galleries, the British Museum, and the Victoria and Albert, and we even managed to see Robert Helpmann in *The Merchant of Venice* and Rudolf Kempe conducting Brahms and Richard Strauss at the Festival Hall. I also got to appreciate the London parks and Regency terraces.

On 31 December I left London for Newcastle, where I was

met by Captain Dickinson—who will be remembered by many Newcastle students as the supervisor of lodgings. He handed me over to a kind Pole who had offered hospitality and promptly took me to the Polish Club to see in the New Year. All the Poles wished to toast Hungary with me in vodka and I shall never find out how I was taken home and put to bed. The next day, as a new year's treat, I was taken to see the sea; I had never seen this before, as Hungary is landlocked, and it looked grey and angry while my splitting headache did not enhance my appreciation of this national asset.

In the course of the next few weeks I was to be entertained at their homes by Professor Bramble Green (the dean of medicine), Dr Paul Szekely (a Hungarian cardiologist), Dr Brian Schofield (my tutor to be), and Dr Alan Horler, then senior medical registrar, who had worked with Sheila Callender in Oxford, and many others. All this meant that by the time the term started I felt quite at home. The rector, Dr Bosanquet, made me feel most welcome and gave me the details of my scholarship. (Later, when I applied for naturalisation he was to write that as a descendant of a refugee Huguenot he felt that England had always benefited from the refugees she had taken in.) My scholarship was generous and I was to receive it weekly. The rector told me that I could come and see him any time, an offer that I hope he did not come to regret. I now realise that the only reason I never failed and qualified a few days before I would have done in Hungary was to ensure that my scholarship did not have to continue indefinitely.

### Irish writers and Hungarian salami

Looking back 26 years later, I find it impossible to believe that a nation could be so uniformly welcoming to a newcomer as England was to me in 1956. What were my first impressions? I was fortunate to have studied English privately and to be reasonably familiar with English literature. At my interview in Vienna I was asked who were my favourite English writers and

when I replied “George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde” I was gently told that perhaps I ought to consider going to Ireland. I had a number of misconceptions about England (as well as the use of umbrellas): I expected people to be distant, I found them friendly and kind. I had been warned that the food would be inedible and the coffee undrinkable; I was pleasantly surprised that these preconceptions were wrong and that it was even

possible to purchase Hungarian salami. Even before the communist regime in Hungary you had had to register wherever you went. To be able to travel all over Britain without hindrance was a magnificent privilege. I was taken to Canterbury, where Dr Hewlett-Johnson, the “Red Dean,” displayed a notice “Proletarians of the world unite.” I realised then that freedom of speech in this country was not illusory.

# The honour—not the honorarium

JUDY BAUM

It can't all be bad being married to a professor. You see, I'm writing this article while sunning myself on a boat, drinking champagne, somewhere in the middle of Lake Geneva in late September. Let me explain; my problem is I'm married to someone who can't say “no.” After 20 years he is still flattered by the invitation to lecture in Bangkok or Blackpool, Dunedin or Dundee, Singapore or Southend, and whether it be for a breakfast meeting or an after dinner talk he just can't say “no.” I seem to spend half my life sitting outside tube stations late at night waiting for my better half to return. I've run into race riots, been picked up for loitering in dark alleyways, watched the newspapers being loaded on to the night train, and have even managed to compile a “good centre guide” of postgraduate centres for visiting lecturers while slumped half asleep in the front seat of the car (table).

absence, and his gastronomical delights, which are often part of these lecture trips, certainly don't pay the bills. No one seems to suffer but me. The children gave up long ago and can only calculate how long he has been away by the value of the gifts that are distributed on his return. Each week away entails seven days of frantic preparation which is followed by seven days' clearing the backlog which has accumulated on his return, which surely must be the equivalent to three weeks of a part time Dad!

Of course he is dedicated to postgraduate education but is it fair that his good will is exploited to such an extent that he is actually subsidising the postgraduate education movement in Britain? Why is there such minimal reward with not even a railway fare to show at the end of the day? Surely our postgraduate tutors should be spending a little more of the drug

“Good centre guide” of postgraduate centres

	Wife invited	Honorarium (£)	Accommodation	Gifts	Prestige	Expenses
Drug house	Yes. Invitation accepted	100-200	+	+	+	First class†
America	Yes. Invitation refused*	200	+	+	+	First class†
Antipodes	Yes. Invitation refused*	100	+	+	+	Club class
South east Asia	No	100	+	+	+	Club class
Europe	No	0-50	+	+	+	Economy
General practice postgraduate centres	No	25-40	+	+	+	Second class rail
British universities	No	—	—	—	+	Second class rail
University of Rome	No	—	—	—	+	Still waiting six months later

\*Because of O levels or acute infections.  
†First class air fare or second class with wife (with children third class).

How nice it would be at the end of this long day to have some worthwhile reward on the table. And what about weekends? Having suffered the absence of a husband and father at weekends during his junior days when he lived in hospital accommodation why must we now suffer his absence when he talks to general practitioners and postgraduates on Saturdays? It is not as if there is anything in it for me; there's no money to show for his

companies' money on the visiting lecturer rather than on wine for the audience. To compensate he can always try to fit in an international rugby match, or if he plays his cards right there is always the opportunity to languish in some exotic hotel leaving behind all thoughts of blocked loos at home and O and A level problems. Meanwhile, I've finally got my own act together, disposed of all three children with no acute infections and no examinations in sight, and have been able to take up the kind invitation of a certain drug company to accompany my husband to a conference in Geneva. So perhaps I shouldn't grumble too much; though it won't pay the bills, it will certainly keep me quiet for at least the next six months while I am sitting outside the tube station.

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