



*Strictly
from
Hungary*

Ladislav Farago

Introduction by John Farago

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Dedication

To the memory of MY MOTHER, who used to forgive me worse things than this

LADISLAS FARAGO, NEW YORK, 1962

This new edition is dedicated to my father's brother, PAUL FARAGO. For as long as I knew him, Paul exhorted those around him, in his impossible-to-place Anglo-European accent, to pay no attention to the Hungarian behind the curtain. And yet after six decades of life in Australia he still seemed wistfully at home strolling Andrásy út in 2002. Sadly, Paul died as this book was going to press.

Among contemporary and future Hungarians, the dedication goes first to my son MAX, just discovering his central European soul at age 18. I wish him many years of the sweetest paprika, the fattest goose livers, and the highest octane barack palinka. To my wife JEANNE MARTIN, who has embraced my Hungarian dream with the don't-look-back enthusiasm of a native Magyar, and to our friend and Budapest mentor, ELIANE PICKERMANN, who demonstrates daily that *joie de vivre* is how "Hungarian" is spelled in French.

JOHN FARAGO, BUDAPEST, 2004

Preface

I accept full responsibility for every word in this book, but I would like to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to my friends Imre Kelen, Sandor Ince, Miklos Lazar, Si Bourgin, Georges Mikes, Eugene Fodor, Jay Nelson Tuck, Sidney Shelley, and especially the late Ferenc Molnar and Ferenc Gondor, who allowed me to draw upon their memories.

Every story in this book is true (more or less) but most of the names had to be doctored.

LADISLAS FARAGO, NEW YORK, 1962

This new edition of *Strictly from Hungary* is, of course, a labor of many loves. Bruce Franklin, a modern visionary with the prescience to look backward while moving forward, has been the *sine qua non*. Kúnos László and Bart István were also essential to the success of the effort. Those who have helped build the bridge between my father's Budapest and mine include: Bakos Anita, Biro Csaba, Kerekes Aniko, Torok Andras, and Tercsak Tamas.

But the Budapest of this book has more ethereal roots as well: In family—Lisa, Richard and Nick Farago—in shades of my youth—Sandor Ince, Imre and Betty Kelen, Alex King, Gene and Vlasta Fodor, Albi and Marika Frankel, George Lang and August Molnar. Those roots flourished in a Budapest-in-New York that has all but vanished: the old Budapest Restaurant (my favorite among the dozens that crowded Yorkville forty years ago), Rigo Pastry, Paprikas Weiss' astonishing emporium, and, among the stalwart survivors, Orwasher's Bakery and the restaurant Mocca.

JOHN FARAGO, BUDAPEST, 2004

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*How I Came
to be
Strictly from Hungary*

ON JULY 20, 2003, I WAS BORN IN BUDAPEST. I WAS 52 YEARS old at the time.

Growing up suffused with tales like those in this book—a salad my father tossed with dollops of gallantry, mischief, charm, and kitsch—Budapest always seemed magically familiar. True, the Hungary of my father’s bedtime stories had more in common with Oz than Austria. Its people were part Peter Pan, part Bilbo Baggins, and part Emperor Franz Jozsef. Teutonic with a twinkle and a wink. What child could resist a nation of such relentlessly playful adults?

When I remained awake after bedtime stories were done, I was often lulled to sleep by the undecipherable chatter of my parents’ Hungarian friends, laughing and arguing in accents whose unique cadence provided the nurturing syncopation of my childhood.

And during the day there were the smells and the tastes of my mother’s kitchen. I grew up nestled in among sautéing onions

and peppers; stuffed in between apples, caraway seeds, and a roasting goose; propped on clouds of *galuska* in rivers of *paprikas* sauce; or rolled up into *palacsinta* and swaddled in apricot *lekvar*.

When I eventually visited Hungary in 1975 with my father, I was 24 and he was 69. It was his first trip back since the 1930s. He was crestfallen by how Budapest's vibrancy had been flattened, its laughter shushed into whispers. But to me it seemed alive and wonderfully evocative of the stories I had grown up with. We walked past Gundel's, the Café New York, Gerbaud—no less important emotional landmarks than Parliament and the National Museum.

We never returned to Budapest together. My father died a decade too soon to see the city's lurching renaissance, but in 2002 my wife and I went back with his younger brother Paul for a long autumn weekend, I felt instinctively that I had come home.

Paul had left in the early 1930s for Australia, where he buried himself in Anglophilia, embracing his new home. And yet, Paul told me in 2002 over dinner in a small Buda café (which he had scouted out in the impeccable Hungarian which he had spent decades denying he could remember at all) that he had dug out his 1935 Hungarian passport and reinstated his Hungarian citizenship. As a result, he said, my cousins—all native-born Australians—had become citizens as well.

I felt compelled to follow suit: My father had always seemed so much more Hungarian than Paul. Indeed, my father's Hungarian-ness was his defining characteristic. In some ways it was world-famous. In his public persona, he had been a George Washington Medal laureate of the American-Hungarian Foundation. Clandestinely, he had single-handedly provoked the 1956 Revolution. Or at least so the Communists claimed.

Starting out as a sports reporter for a sensationalist Budapest tabloid, my father became a stringer for British and American

newspapers, stationed himself in Berlin, hung out on the fringes of the avant garde, and wrote sketches for German cabarets and witty commentary for Berlin newspapers. He became a war correspondent, sending dispatches for the pages of American and European newspapers from the front lines of wars we no longer remember. Like his brother, he left Europe young, in the early 1930s, several steps ahead of the Nazis, but unlike Paul my father brought his homeland with him. His accent, his hand-kissing charm, his love of the country of his birth; these were unmistakable.

He spent World War II in Washington, D.C., at a desk in Naval Intelligence, more or less inventing psychological warfare. After the war he found his way to Radio Free Europe. There, he conjured up an American intelligence agent, Col. Bell, who, together with a band of Hungarian stalwarts, took responsibility for every small disaster that befell Communist Hungary in the early 1950s. Bell seemed to be everywhere, responsible for a building collapse one week in Budapest, a fire in Debrecen the next. But, in truth, Col. Bell was nowhere at all, my father was just collating reports from Radio Free Europe's correspondents within Hungary who smuggled out news of local catastrophes so that Col. Bell and his band of virtual *agents provocateur* could lay claim to them. In this way, the United States appeared to have infiltrated Hungary already, providing a fictional but seductive infrastructure for the rebellion they hoped to foment. My father was assured that when the rebellion took root, genuine American troops would immediately back it up.

Once a week he broadcast a report of Col. Bell's most recent activities. Hungarians gathered around hidden radios and marveled at America's pervasive presence in their country. When the rebellion actually caught fire in 1956, however, America didn't follow through on its promises and the uprising was swiftly and tragically ground down under the treads of Russian tanks.

After the dust settled, the Communists issued a white paper in which they blamed Col. Bell for the whole thing.

Now Col. Bell's son was laying claim to a post-Communist Hungarian birthright. I had not realized, however, that to do so I would have to venture to the place where communism and capitalism meet: the deep foundation of petty bureaucracy on which both systems are built. I doubt that virtually any ripples were felt at the ministerial desks along the Danube in 1990, when department heads were ousted overnight but clerks and middle-managers merely rolled over in their sleep.

Inevitably, my citizenship application lay in their meticulous hands. After several months of silence, I was asked to provide supporting documentation. But I had already given them everything I had—including a copy of my father's birth certificate from Csurgo and my own from New York—and they acknowledged that the chain was proven beyond a reasonable doubt: he was born a Hungarian, I was his son. Still my father had chosen to marry a non-Hungarian (skeptical sidelong glance), and did so in Berlin (frown). I lacked a copy of his last Hungarian passport (deepening frown, wrinkling brow).

It turns out that there was, and still is I think, a law to the effect that a Hungarian loses his citizenship if he leaves the country for ten years without even a moment's layover back on Hungarian land. The post-Communist amnesty was available only to Hungarian citizens who had left under the Nazis or the Communists (after 1939 and before 1990). The Ministry needed to be convinced that my father had been in Hungary for at least one day during the ten years preceding 1939, or else he would have renounced his citizenship.

Would I be so good as to submit proof that Ladislav Farago had set foot in Hungary some time after 1929 (glower)?

This would not be easy. My father had lived with his parents, returning only sporadically once he became a foreign correspondent. His name did not appear independently in telephone or street directories, and proving that my grandparents or uncle had been there at the proper moment would do me no good at all (stern glare).

His byline appeared in Hungarian newspapers, but the Ministry frowned some more: those articles could well have been written outside Hungary; they did not constitute proof of presence. How about an affidavit from my uncle? Perhaps. They would have to see. They would let me know (officious cough). In the meanwhile, my application languished in its file folder and I heard nothing.

I consulted an experienced and well-connected immigration lawyer in Budapest. I paid the office a modest fee. I acquired the services of a talented young graduate law student who could translate for me, in the broadest sense of the word, at the Ministry. I was assured that with proper translation, the matter would be viewed sympathetically.

My translator and I returned to Buda, but the news was still equivocal. The ministry staff did indeed now wish they could be helpful. The frowns and doubts were replaced by shrugs, self-deprecatory bows, and apologies. If only we could come up with something that would demonstrate my father's physical presence in Hungary after 1929, they would be more than happy to help. Surely we must have something (ingratiating smile)?

We persevered. I asked my uncle for the affidavit. I started looking around for 90-year-old Hungarian eggheads who might recall my father from the Budapest nightlife he described in these pages. I hired a college student to research old newspapers to find articles by my father in which he reported first-hand about a Hungarian event (in vain).

None of these bore fruit. I vented to my small but sympathetic legal team. My father was an anticommunist stalwart. He believed himself to be a Hungarian to the day he died. He was so Hungarian that he had even written a book about it. This book—the very book you are holding in your hands—my father's only work of humor.

I sent a copy to my translator to demonstrate the depth of my father's Hungarian roots. How could the man who transcribed these stories, who captured so vividly the conmen and starlets of

the demimonde, be denied his (and, by extension, my) Hungarian citizenship?

A week after sending the book to Budapest I got a call at home in New York. Jubilantly, my law student friend, who had by now graduated and was studying for the Bar, told me to pick up my copy. Exultantly, he ordered me to turn immediately to page 148 and read. I saw nothing special there. My father tells the story better, but my young friend was getting worked up about nothing more than the following tired but amusing old joke.

My father is sitting at his usual table at the Café New York. He has had a couple of cups of coffee and a ham roll. As he gets up to leave, the headwaiter, Lajos, presents him with a check for 47 pengoes, the equivalent of about \$250. Shocked, and with only a few coins in his pocket, he asks Lajos how the check could possibly be that much. Lajos tells him that while today's bill amounts to only two pengoes; his arrears total 45. My father is irate:

“Don't be silly! Since when are you so hell-bent on collecting arrears?”

“Since 1930, as far as you're concerned,” Lajos responded.

And there we had it: My father. The Café New York. 1930.

That alignment, I was assured, would pay out the jackpot on the Ministry's slot machine. This, my young friend assured me, was a home run in the ballpark of bureaucracy.

I returned to Buda and to the Ministry, accompanied by my translator and gripping a photocopy of page 148 with Lajos' words highlighted in yellow marker. My file was found, the off-print added to it, and I swiftly received a document affirming my Hungarian citizenship. Not only that, but it was followed by my Hungarian birth certificate, my Hungarian marriage license, and the Hungarian birth certificate of my 17-year-old son, Max.

And so, on July 20, 2003, I suddenly had always been a Hungarian. In fact, through Max I was on my way to producing

an entire Hungarian dynasty. And the whole thing grew out of that most enduringly Hungarian topsoil, the punchline of a charming, if somewhat stale, anecdote.

Like the story of my citizenship, the tales that follow derive from the Hungary of a century ago. A Hungary that perhaps never was, but that surely always will be. These are stories about the Hungary of my father's childhood and the Hungary of my middle age. They are distillations of the Hungary from before, during, and after the war – pick a war, any war. Above all else, they are the story of a country in which now, as always, the most important consequences can flow from whether or not one has paid one's tab at the Café New York.

JOHN FARAGO

John's All-Purpose Hungarian Recipe

(This recipe is based on the premise that all Hungarian dishes, or at least all Hungarian meat stews, are basically variations on a theme.)

PHASE I: FRY THE ONIONS.

The first step is to fry the onions. Dice 2 large onions. Fry in fat appropriate to the meat (lard for pork, goosefat for poultry, either of these or butter or suet for beef or veal). The trick is that you want the onions to begin to brown—caramelize—which brings out their sweetness, dries them out, and gets rid of the oniony aftertaste. If the temperature is allowed to drop too much, the onions will turn to mush before they caramelize. To avoid this, use a pan that retains heat. Cast iron or enameled cast iron takes a long time to change temperature. The heavier the better. Then get it as hot as possible, which means bring the fat to just below the temperature at which it starts to smoke (when the first hints of smoke appear, throw in the onions). Solid fats—goosefat, lard, butter, Crisco, suet—start to smoke at a higher temperature than liquid fats (that makes sense, since they melt into liquid from a solid at a higher temperature).

Add about a tablespoon of salt, sprinkle with a good hit of pepper, and fry at medium-high heat. The fat is what keeps the onions from burning, so there needs to be a good bit of it (I start with about 4-6 tablespoons and add more if it looks like things are sticking too much). You wind up cooking the water out of them, so eventually they should be golden brown with very few bubbles, just fat and onions left in the pan.

Variant: *Peppers.* Almost all Hungarian dishes except *Szekely Gulyas* require peppers as well as onions. No peppers for *Szekey Gulyas*! I chop the peppers after I throw the onions into the pan and throw the peppers in with the frying onions as soon as they are all chopped. This gives the pan a chance to heat back up and the onions a chance to start to caramelize before the peppers add their water and make it harder to get everything to brown. The peppers, too, should cook out their water and begin to brown around the edges.

Variant: Root vegetables. Before adding peppers, consider adding a couple of handfuls of finely chopped carrots and perhaps 1/3 or 1/2 that amount of chopped parsnips. These should cook down to almost nothing before it's all done, so get them well softened while sautéing. The effect is to sweeten the sauce somewhat, and make it richer.

Variant: Apple. I add a thinly sliced whole apple (something tart, usually Granny Smith) to the onions and peppers. Start to peel after you throw in the peppers, core it, slice it translucently thin, throw it in.

Variant: Mushrooms. Not a very Hungarian *gulyas* ingredient, but mushrooms absorb the flavor of whatever they are cooked with, pretty intensively, so they are an interesting addition to any flavorful stew. Here the trick is to cook the water out of them before putting them in the stew. They should be quartered or sliced, and sautéed on very high heat until all the water cooks out but not until they brown, and then added to the pot once the peppers and onions are starting to brown.

Variant: Caraway seeds. You can, and probably should, throw a tablespoon or less of caraway seeds in with the onions, peppers, and apple (not for *Szekely Gulyas*, though for reasons that become obvious).

PHASE II: BROWN THE MEAT.

The next step is to sear the meat so that it stays moist as it stews. It doesn't matter what the meat is. Cut the meat into 1-inch chunks, unless you're using a whole chicken, then cut it up into eight pieces, dry the meat, and rub with salt, pepper, and some form of garlic (crushed actually works least well because it burns easily; powdered, granulated, or garlic salt works well). Be generous with all three parts of the rub.

Remove the vegetables from the fat (let the fat drain back into the pot), and crank up the heat again. In relatively small batches, sear the meat so that it crusts at the edges. Let it sit for a bit without stirring or it won't brown. Then turn and scrape it a bit till it's browned all around. Again, unless the heat is high, the meat will start to simmer in its own juices, which is sort of the opposite of what you want.

When all the meat is done, deglaze the pan of the brown/black stuff that's stuck to the bottom. You can use water to do this, say, about 1/2

cup. Scrape the bottom as the water boils, and let it boil vigorously until it pretty much all has evaporated.

Variant: *Deglazing liquid.* I actually use Tokaji or some other sweet dessert wine. But you can use Port (I use white Port) or apple cider. I also add the juice of about 1/2 lemon (be careful not to let the seeds fall in; they turn sour when they cook).

PHASE III: STEW IT.

Throw the meat, onions, peppers, etc. back into the pot with the fat and add the paprika. I use a vast amount (about 1/2 cup) of the sweetest Hungarian paprika I can find. Mix it around until the paprika dissolves. If you don't mix it, it will burn in the fat. Bring the temperature down to the lowest simmer you can get and put a cover on it.

Variant: *Hot Paprika.* In addition to the sweet paprika, I add about 1/2 teaspoon of hot paprika. You can always add more later if you want it spicy.

Variant: *Szekely Gulyas.* *Szekely Gulyas* is a pork *gulyas* with sauerkraut. Once the pork is simmering, it's time to start thinking about the sauerkraut. The question here is, "How sour do you like it?" I like it not very sour. I buy fresh kraut from a Hungarian butcher or a place that sells fresh pickles, and I rinse it with cold water until it tastes right. You should make sure that it's still at least a little sour, that's sort of the point. Then simmer it in a separate pot (to get it warm and soft), with about 2 tablespoons of caraway seeds mixed in. The balance between kraut and meat is entirely up to you; use anywhere from equal amounts (by weight, uncooked) to twice as much meat as kraut.

Variant: *Tomatoes.* While it is simmering, you can add tomatoes: 1 can or less of whole Italian-style plum tomatoes, mashed up, or 1 similar-sized can of crushed tomatoes, or as much thick tomato paste as you feel like, or two to three fresh tomatoes, or whatever you'd like. This is entirely a matter of personal taste. Tomatoes can add sweetness, intensity, and color, depending on what you use and how much. My mother always used to sneak in a couple of tablespoons of thickened paste. I toss in a fresh tomato or two if I have a couple that are very

ripe, and when I cook in volume I'll toss in a large canful for bulk and flavor. Start with none; experiment to see whether you want to add any.

PHASE IV: FINISH THE SAUCE.

Let the stew simmer for at least a couple of hours, until the meat stops being tough and chewy. Be patient, it will eventually get flaky and soft. When it does, you're almost done. How you finish the sauce depends on what you want it to be when you're done.

Variante: *Szekely Gulyas*. Basically, all you have to do now is drain the kraut and combine it with the meat. Stir it around, add a bit more (2 to 4 tablespoons) sweet paprika so that the kraut will take on a rosy red color, and simmer them together for 30 minutes or so, very low heat, stirring occasionally so it doesn't burn. When you serve it, add sour cream to taste and stir it around so the color turns a creamy red. About 1 cup should do it. You can put more sour cream on the table with it, as well as sweet and hot paprikas. A variant within the variant: You can add sliced sausage during this final heating phase while the meat and kraut are together. *Debrecen* (a Hungarian sausage) or *kolbasz* or any sausage you feel like, about 1/2- to 1-inch-thick rounds. You can also add another apple, finely diced, but then be sure to keep the dish simmering until the apple turns soft and indistinguishably mushy.

Variante: *Gulyas* soup. Real *gulyas* is a thin beef soup, more sharp than sweet. If that's what you're aiming for, add some beef or veal or even chicken stock to thin it down to watery consistency, and add hot paprika to taste. You can boil some potatoes in with it and some carrots and parsnips and turnips if you want. If you're going to add these vegetables, don't let the meat get too soft in phase III before you add them, since you'll be cooking it for about another hour after the vegetables get tossed in. Serve with tiny dumplings cooked in the *gulyas*, a dollop of sour cream (about 1 teaspoon per bowl) and sprinkle with a dash of hot paprika on top.

Variante: *Goulash*. Actually, in Hungarian, a *pörkölt*. At the end of phase III, that's pretty much what you have. Make sure the sauce is hearty and flavorful. If not, remove the meat and boil it down (you can

also add paprika) to get a dense, intense sauce. It will be thinned a bit by the cream, so you really want it intense. When it's to taste, serve with sour cream and hot and sweet paprikas on the side. A variant within the variant: there is no defensible reason not to add 1 cup of heavy cream at the very end. Mix it in.

VARIANT: *Paprikas.* *Paprikas* sauce is a smooth creamy sauce. Take the meat out of the stew and get the sauce to the same intense place described above for goulash. There's no turning back; however intense you get it here, that's the most it will ever be again, so make sure you're happy with it before going on. Then throw the onions, peppers, etc. into a food processor with whatever sauce travels with them, and puree them down into a smooth paste (if you have added mushrooms, it sort of ruins them to puree them, so I'd leave it as a goulash if you've got mushrooms in it). Throw the puree back into the sauce. (Do it slowly, so that you get the right texture and taste to suit you.) Add the meat back in. (This will thin the sauce a bit because the meat juices will have come out while it was sitting there.) Add 1 cup of heavy cream (or less, to taste). Stir. Serve with sour cream. I put a dollop on each serving (about 2 tablespoons), and let the people mix it in themselves, or you can just serve it on the side.

Final Notes: Serve with some form of noodle or dumpling. You can always correct flavor by playing with any of the following at any stage (in diminishing order of rationality): salt, sweet paprika, hot paprika, sweet wine (Tokaji or port), lemon juice, garlic powder, apple cider.