

# A Trekker's Tale

A Short Story & Prologue to the Novel

## **GREEN CARD SOLDIER**

*An Historic Adventure Novel*

by **Bruce E. Zielsdorf**

Every reputable reporter keeps a notebook. As a proud member of the Fourth Estate, I'm constantly writing in mine. These records are so important I scribble my name, Heath Winslow, full across the cover of every spiral binder. Then I jot my New York address below my moniker. Should I misplace one of these journalistic gems, I can only hope a stranger will forward the grungy notepad to me.

But, if my chronicle is mailed home, am I obligated to act on it? Do I call out my inner correspondent and scurry to draft a story from those recovered remarks? Okay, I'll be the first to admit my sarcastic edge has been sharpened through decades of endless reporting on bloody conflicts large and small. That's why I bristle at the thought of interacting with such dutiful strangers.

Not meaning to be a wet blanket, it's time to stop this mind game and focus on the task at hand. I take a moment to scan a memo dated Nov. 1, 1990. I know these aren't hard-hitting, fact-based footnotes for my next article, but I find them to be critical mileposts along my wandering road of discovery.

**Notebook entry:** *Liptauer cheese spread...*

“Check!” I can state with pride as I locate item one on my shopping list. I’ve long realized such records are a matter of survival. Without an inventory, a diligent foodie like me would be lost trying to navigate Budapest’s Great Market Hall – this country’s largest indoor bazaar. The barrage of sights, sounds and smells within this massive wrought iron and stained glass food palace is relentless. My senses are bombard from every direction. Shouldn’t this place be proclaimed Europe’s cornucopia of culinary delights? I’ve yet to see that entry in any *Michelin Guide*.

**Notebook entry:** *Csabai Kolbász...*

“Check again!” is my response as a vendor thrusts forward my second paper-wrapped purchase. When shopping here, I instinctively adopt a bloodhound’s sense. I’ll not be seduced by the aroma of opulent Turkish coffee, or the peppery bite of Göcseji cheese. No way... Instead, I revel in nibbling on teeny Hungarian sausages, trying to choose which ones to befriend. This is no small task, even for a self-proclaimed gourmet like me.

**Notebook entry:** *Tokaji wine & plum Pálinka...*

“Check!” I assert as a fine liquor is found. All gastronomic goodies should be balanced by a sweet vino or fruity brandy. Tokaji wine is heralded in Hungary’s national anthem. So, I feel obligated to buy it; should I not?

**Notebook entry:** *Paprika & caviar...*

A final “Check!” and I pronounce my excursion complete. Exploring the corridors of this red brick behemoth has always invigorated me. This colossal space shouts with the bravado of a carnival barker, “Experience the ancient one. Come join the fun!” Who am I to object when such epicurean delights leap to present themselves?

I have some advice for visitors, though: Don’t overlook the countless booths on the second floor – a massive shelter for tacky tourist trinkets. Stall after stall is filled to overflowing with Orthodox icons painted in China. Forget not the Babushka dolls carved in Vietnam, a fake crystal vase from who knows where and stacks of heavy-handed embroidery – perfect for draping Aunt Adrian’s sofa.

Well, my notebook’s reviewed and a fitting level of criticism has been heaped. I sense it’s time to find the rail head. The InterCity to Belgrade leaves just before noon and I want to be on it. With a couple dozen stops, it’s no express to the Serbian heartland, but that’s okay. The ride will give me time to observe the locals, a writer’s true pleasure in life. So, why do I insist on taking the train? First off, I love locomotives. And it will give me a chance to reflect on the crescendo of war threats now churning in that multiethnic Balkan backwater.

**Notebook entry:** *By early '90s, Yugoslavia is plagued with problems... Foreign debt, inflation & unemployment cloud the air... Nationalist feelings & political snags fester, leading to crisis... Milosevic rejects ideas for a looser federation*

But why must I again charge forward to report from such a political hotbed? We're entering the last decade of the 20th century; wake up people! Just look what's going on. Iraq has invaded Kuwait, East and West Germany struggle to reunite, Europe's commies are hanging it up and the World Wide Web has debuted – whatever that means. Bottom line: This should be a busy, busy decade. By extrapolation, it's the essence of a reporter's bliss, and more importantly, just what my editor ordered.

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The cab driver's Lada wheezes and shakes its rusty shell toward a Gothic cathedral-like structure known as the Budapest-Keleti Rail Station. I pay him. He pops from the Marxist heap to gather my suitcase, shopping bags and attaché. I offer a second tip, but the cabbie refuses. Instead, he points toward a ticket kiosk and encourages me to step lively into my new adventure.

No one said I'd be riding the Orient Express, but I didn't plan on hiking half the Hungarian frontier just to board a train. Okay, so I'm dragging too damn much stuff, as usual. I soon realize the need to execute a few Manhattan-style sidewalk dodge-and-weave maneuvers, if I'm to proceed. It's an acquired urban skill that allows me to zigzag past hordes of peasant ladies who've begun swarming on to the platforms. I find it intriguing they're all laden with enormous bouquets of sweet-scented flowers. And not to my surprise, the cantankerous itty-biddies are

pushing and shoving like miniature sumo wrestlers in a crazed attempt to board the train all at once.

I execute a mental slap on the forehead, realizing I've strolled smack dab into the middle of an All Saints, Souls, or Something Day mass exodus from the city. And now I'm surrounded by a colony of babushkas scurrying about like penguins waddling to the sea.

**Notebook entry:** *Halottak Napja – Day of Remembrance... Instead of Halloween, Hungarians head to the cemeteries for All Soul's Day... Prayers believed to lighten the way for those living in purgatory... Death is nothing unusual here*

The poor women on the platforms are consumed by a single-minded purpose: Scuttle to their villages in time to put flowers on gravesites and light lanterns to lost loved ones before tomorrow's sun sets. Based on centuries of Balkan tradition, this is what the devout must do.

Mustering my own determination, I'm able to pass a multitude clad in multi-layered funeral garb. My knees are now aching in time with my fast-beating heart. I soon reach a railcar where seating appears available. I struggle up the steps and into the coach. A single, somewhat worn, dark green velveteen lounge seat, nestled with a petite, but chipped, wood-veneer desk, presents itself. It's a silent, but genuine, invitation to sit. I accept the offer and settle in for the journey.

My travel banquet is quickly put on display – a caviar tin is opened, Lipto cheese spread unwrapped and crusty artisan bread at the ready. It's time to "Prost!" this Mad Hatter sojourn with a shot of Hungary's finest. As I lift my glass of brandy, the train pitches forward and back, then begins its slow lumber out of the station.

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Before long, my romantic repast is interrupted by a verbal exchange erupting at the far end of the coach. The commotion involves a boyish-looking conductor in an ill-fitting uniform confronting what appear to be three affluent tourists.

**Notebook entry:** *Two trendy women & a male companion... Spent high end to gear down... Only East Coast fashion slaves have the acumen & cash to dress with such style... Ugly Americans at their finest*

“Ön a hibás a vonat,” the baby-faced train official states.

“We don’t speak Hungarian,” the first sojourner replies.

“Ön a hibás a vonat,” the conductor shouts.

“Parlez-vous Français?” the second female tourist asks.

Once again the youthful officiato hollers, “Ön a hibás a vonat!”

“Sprechen sie Deutsch?” the male traveler interjects.

“Ön a hibás...,” is all the conductor will say, sounding shriller each time he repeats the phrase.

“Okay, last chance... Parli Italiano?” the first woman asks, as if resigned to the fact her question will only generate a repeat of the previous response.

And she’s right. “Ön a...,” the young man says yet again. This time it’s more of a pleading attempt to solicit action from the three.

“Can you believe it?” the lad in the middle says with a huff. “Here we are, three seasoned world travelers who speak half a dozen languages, and we can’t get this zit-faced bureaucrat to understand a damn word we’re saying.”

Then, as if on cue, a dapper gentleman rises from a nearby seat and steps into the fray. He tips his fedora and in perfect English quips, “Dorothy, you’re not in Kansas anymore.”

The ensemble’s male member bites his lip in a desperate attempt to keep his laughter at bay. Then, the older chap begins to explain. “What your conductor’s trying to tell you is that you’re on the wrong train.”

“What?” they all cry out.

Taking their tickets from the conductor for closer examination, the impromptu interpreter advises them, “You not only boarded the wrong train, you started out from the wrong station.”

“What?” the three repeat their scream.

“You must return to Budapest, taxi to the Déli station and take the next train bound for Lake Balaton, if you wish to see Transdanubia. And you should do so now, as this train will be stopping soon.”

The globe-trekking triumvirate begins dashing about, gathering their belongings. They struggle, with bags held overhead, toward my end of the coach as part of a mad group shuffle to exit. All of a sudden, one of the side pockets on metro-man’s suitcase bursts. As a result, his underwear tumbles on to a cluster of peasant ladies sitting nearby.

With what appears to be genuine concern for the traveler’s lost belongings, a gnarled old woman stretches the waistband on a pair of briefs and shouts, “Mister Hanes! Mister Hanes!”

The busted bag man collapses to his knees in a fit of uncontrollable laughter. He can't move, having been so completely struck down by the malapropos moment.

"Get up, you fool!" his companions shriek in unison. "Let's go."

"This is the last time you're put in charge of hangover detail," one of the women mutters as they cram the vestibule between cars.

The man's spirit is broken. He struggles to stand, then continues schlepping his belongings down the aisle. As the station nears, the train screeches to halt. The three disheveled wanderers disembark. Fumbling like klutzes, they begin waving and thanking everyone on board.

But, thanks for what, I wonder? I can't figure it out. Oh, forget it... No one else really knows, nor do they care.

The locomotive lurches and once more we're on our way.

Trying to repress a smirk, I glance toward the far end of the compartment. In a subtle farewell gesture, the gentleman who first interceded on the sojourners' behalf, pulls down the window, tips his hat and reminds the three, "Don't forget to follow the yellow brick road!"

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