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Extract from the novel *Hansen's Children*

With the slow snow the lepers descend.
René Char "Victory Lightning"¹

Europe's last home for lepers, or leprosarium, is located in south-eastern Romania amidst the leprous landscapes of dark, barren soil, scarred by the smokestacks of power stations and the remnants of once mighty forests. Long have the fertile clods disappeared that recalled the heavy footsteps of Burebista and Decebalus, the Dacian princes ever ready to sink iron into the glistening flanks of Roman horses and the bellies of Trajan's strapping, well-fed legionaries. Later Vlad III, the Impaler, Prince Mircea the Old, Stephen the Great of Moldavia, the 'Athlete of Christ', and Michael the Brave – all devoted apostles of the word of God – were like stars in the back night that Christendom looked up to with hope when Ottoman scimitars spilt rivers of young blood.

Throughout history, as people like to recall, this country was torn apart by the claws of evil old lions, their grizzled manes spattered with the gore of subjugated millions.

But Romania has not forgotten the glory of the brave. Rivers flow past, but rocks remain, as a Romanian saying goes, and even today tales are told of the exploits of Prince Vlad's heroic legions that devoted their last ounce of strength to their native land.

My dear room-mate, Robert W. Duncan, has a habit of saying that history is the third eye of humanity and that it allows us to perceive more clearly the pitfalls of our melancholic age. I always reply by citing Emil Cioran who wrote that, if there were no such thing as melancholy, people would roast and eat nightingales; Robert replies that he is horrified by the very thought of plucked nightingale garnished with mint and garlic, and begs me not to mention the painful notion again. I began to chirp through my missing teeth, flap my arms and flutter around the room until Robert grabs his slippers and flings them at my head. He wants to sleep. I cannot.

I like to stand at the window on dry summer evenings and feel the tiny fragments of history – only recently turned to dust – rain against my bare head in the fresh breeze from the Carpathians or the warmer one that blows steadily down the rocky slopes of the Transylvanian Alps. I smell the forests and the whortleberry, the breath of lush fields and the flower of the dwarf lilac bush; the taste of the stones, whose particles grit between my teeth and stab at the delicate veil of my cataract. When I close my right eye, which is healthy and full of life, a curtain of mist descends on the landscape – the moon becomes squashed chewing gum and my room-mate a dozing rat. The violet lights of the nearby fertiliser factory flicker like dying stars, while the bronze bust of King Alexander John I in the middle

¹ Translation by Christopher Mulrooney
<<http://mulrooney.portland.co.uk/tongues417.html>>

of the leprosarium courtyard hardly seems to be there. I open my right eye and close the left. I open and close them in turn, enjoying my own private dualism of the world.

The pages that follow are written as seen through the right eye and with the involvement of all my rational, conscious being.

The people I met and got to know on my road – you will appreciate that I cannot say anything first-hand about Burebista and Decebalus, or King John – will be described as my conscience dictates. Those I did not meet but who by design or chance have become an indelible part of my life, will be transformed into words to the best of my ability, and I shall take care that not one printed letter scar the full beauty of the truth.

CHAPTER ONE

On 16 April 1989, I got up before the others. I planned to pick some of the still unopened daffodils that grew along the southern wall of the leprosarium. I wanted them to flower in my room, so I went down the two sets of stairs from the second floor with a tin brim-full of water. The evening before, the tin had been full of pineapple rings which Robert and I had savoured. The tins of pineapple regularly escaped the attention of the customs officials and hungry Romanian villagers. They would flog any foodstuffs of value when aid packages came from the International Red Cross – only the tins of this juicy tropical fruit would be left at the bottom of the boxes. Presumably this was due to some food-related superstition like 'coffee from South Africa is radioactive' or 'New Zealand apples are artificially coloured'.

It was a pleasure to look out at the snowy slopes of the distant mountains and think of the hands of the Caribbean girls, their fingers, which just a few months earlier had caressed the coarse skin of the fruit we were relishing the heart of. As we devoured our pineapple, in our thoughts we licked the palms of those tender hands, and I am not ashamed to say that I often ended up with a slight erection.

Rays of the early sun were tenderly piercing the tall plume of smoke from the fertiliser factory. Daffodils are best picked before the sun rises – that way you catch them asleep, petals closed, and can shift them to a different bed. The cold water makes them stay fresh for several weeks and they open every morning.

I picked them by breaking the stems a centimetre above the ground, taking care not to damage the large bulb that held many more yellow flowers for the years to come – for the graves that would hold the leprous bones of my friends.

Since 1981 we had been confined to the leprosarium so as to reduce the costs of transport to the crematorium in Bucharest and avoid sending urns to families throughout Europe. This change did not prompt any great protest, I recall, because all of us lepers – now I've said it – spent our days here due to those same relatives' dread of our ancient illness. Leprosy most commonly conjures up two things in people's minds: firstly, scenes from William Wyler's Ben Hur – a colony of lepers roaming the earth as if punished by God, doomed to contempt and a painful death in lonely caves far from the city; and secondly, fear of a biological

aberration that a fatal mistake of nature – or perhaps divine justice – had let blunder into our modern age.

They believed that our pale gnarled flesh, the bulging growths on our backs, arms, and necks, contained spores of the disease just waiting to waft out and democratically disseminate the oldest of all diseases. Dull-witted Romanian villagers – their minds decayed by irrational fears and superstitions – considered us outcasts, pariahs of humanity, and at the same time evil; they forbade their ugly children from playing within hundreds of metres of the leprosarium fence.

I always had the impression that our building and its immediate surroundings were seen more as a haunted graveyard teeming with evil spirits than as a medical institution. I suppose this was compounded by the long linen garments we wore – necessary protection from the sun and the gazes of other lepers. Of those who had eyes, at least.

Every leper wants to know how the bodies of the others are disfigured. This is a standard topic of private conversation among them – a morbid show-and-tell of what they lack. The most sensitive spot are the male genitals, which in some stages of the disease closely resemble dried gentian root or an old man's crooked and impotent fingers. The health of this body part tacitly determined a person's status in the colony.

I had the rare fortune that my masculinity remained untouched by the 'marvels' of Gerhard Armauer Hansen's bacillus. Since I was endowed with quite decent dimensions before contracting the disease, soon after arrival your narrator was ascribed the status of leader – whatever that meant.

Whenever it was time to share out the alms that the Catholic community had left for us at the gate, estimate the amount of firewood needed or divide a crop of potatoes or cherries into fair parts – I was called on to preside. Usually everything went off without any problems. Either there were no complaints, or no one had the strength to complain. Protest was limited to mutterings under linen hoods or minor squabbles in the dark corridors of the building. But sometimes things got out of hand and required radical measures in agreement with the other residents. One time Cion Eminescu clobbered Mstislaw Kasiewicz on the head with a large piece of firewood – all because of a misunderstanding about the size of the tomatoes they had been given. This demanded a swift and just reaction.

Grudgingly I unlocked the door to Room 42 – a cellar which by consensus could be used as a lock-up to sanction unacceptable behaviour. It was only used four times in all my years at the leprosarium. Poor Cion spent the night he deserved in there, and the next morning too – he was offended by being punished and refused to come out. When Mstislaw generously offered to relinquish his share of the juicy red orbs, Cion came out sobbing; the former enemies fell into each other's arms and everything returned to normal.

Mstislaw's and Cion's warm embraces were later exchanged in the intimacy of high-ceilinged rooms, on mattresses filled with mouldy wool, in the bathrooms and dead-end corridors of the leprosarium. I never understood how they overcame the disfigurement of their disease-riddled bodies. Cion had no nose; instead there was a gaping hole, dark and mucousy, which you could stick at least two fingers into. Nor was the rest of him particularly attractive. His

right leg, without the foot, dragged on the ground behind him like a corpse, while exceptionally large lumps of hardened flesh lifted the linen robe off his back.

Mstislaw suffered from a different form of mutilation. His facial features were all intact, but the disease affected the joints of every limb. This gave him a gait reminiscent of the movements of a monstrous marionette from a child's darkest nightmares. Whatever the sexual relationship of these two unfortunates was like, I am sure Mstislaw was never on his knees.

The first complaints about their affair began for reasons that were exceedingly pragmatic and equally ridiculous. Issue 36 of the Medical Gazette (January 1984), published in Bucharest under the auspices of the United Nations, pompously announced "a new disease that would change the face of the earth". In the next few days everyone read the pages about "Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome", some with a sneer, others with calm incomprehension. The advent of this new pestilence also instilled a degree of envy, I noted. You could tell that leprosy was held in strange awe by its victims. Bitter debates ensued in the courtyard, senseless statements were made, full of scorn and hatred; some claimed that AIDS was a medical farce designed to detract from the acknowledged scourges of humanity – the plague, cancer, syphilis, and of course leprosy. They loved their disease and respected it as a worthy opponent.

"AIDS primarily affects intravenous drug-users, haemophiliacs and homosexuals", Ingemar Zoltán read out, while the others nodded with an air of importance and exchanged whispers in which, not surprisingly, the names Cion and Mstislaw were heard. With this new knowledge, attitudes to the two lovers changed considerably. The nature of the new disease was misunderstood and homosexual acts per se were seen as spawning the new evil. Mstislaw and Cion were shunned... like lepers. It was kind of understandable.

Those who are not familiar with the subtle moods of the deformed leprous body and mind will find it hard to understand lepers' seemingly irrational behaviours. These are often rooted in motivations foreign to those of you from that other world – the world of non-lepers. It was the same mechanism that caused the excommunication of Cion and Mstislaw, but this was obscured by the commotion about 'the new disease' and its alleged apostles, the homosexuals.

Over the years the reality of leprosy gave rise to the rule that emotions were impossible and forbidden in the leprosarium – we were all one body that lived the disease, slept the disease, and died of it. This practical arrangement, if I may be so bold, could be considered part of the natural equilibrium that aims to preserve the fragile physical and mental health of the human race.

Liquidation of the penis did away with reproductive instincts and the possibility of pregnancies within the community of lepers.

In the leprosarium, together with eleven men, there was almost one woman.

I put it like that because the old Russian woman, Margareta Yosipovich, vegetated in a state of semi-hibernation from as early as I can remember. She did not leave her room for years

on end, but Death did not yet want to call for her. I was the only one who visited. I knocked once a week; and after waiting patiently for her vocal chords to utter a barely audible mumble, I would go in to take her pulse and spoon some soup into her mouth. Margareta would reply with stories – memories that went back to the last days of tsarist Russia and the cruel gulags of the Siberian tundras, but also to the early history of the leprosarium shortly after it was founded.

Her rasping voice came from deep inside, its low frequencies filling the room. After ten minutes I felt it was coming from all around. She spoke fluently and in a steady tone reminiscent of an old gramophone record.

Her Russian sometimes drove me crazy. She would speak about the tsarist period using an assortment of archaic terms and exotic adjectives, which completely undermined my school Russian. When she spoke of Red Russia it was like a parade of presumptuous names of different committees and titles of minor Stalinist officials. It was thanks to them, if I got it right, that she and her husband froze their butts off in Siberia for years on end. And it was there, in Gulag 32-A, that Margareta contracted Hansen's bacillus in return for her labours. Broken by the heavy burden of leprosy, this courageous woman managed to stay healthy in mind up until the very end. Margareta had abandoned her body, consciously discharging it and hoping for the compassion of her fellow lepers. She had spent the last ten years afloat on a black sea of memories, constantly complaining of the cold, the Siberian cold, that dwelt evermore in her skull.

My torment, and that of the others, began at daybreak. A line of blue workers' aprons filed off to work, and you awaited a day full of pains of various intensity. Your communication with the rest of the world usually began with looking to see if there were any new changes to your body. Depending on what you saw, your resulting mood would range from suicidal depression to mild happiness.

The mirrors in the rooms of the leprosarium saw scenes that could have been from hell. Every room had a mirror, and from the early morning hours you could hear expletives or howls of pain – proof that Hansen had been busy during the night. Fear drove many to imagine that the lump on their back had grown overnight, that part of their nose had been pushed to the left, or that the skin on the back of their hand had become unnaturally rough. Just imagine what the disease was doing to the back of our eyes – a common headache led to all sorts of thoughts!

So it was that *Mycobacterium leprae* sculpted away at us, not only bodily but also in mind, deforming it at times in a similar way to the gaping wounds on lepers' backs and shoulders. You could not expect these circumstances to be conducive to the human race's characteristic well-intentionedness and optimism, but these traits undeniably existed in the leprosarium too. Perhaps physical ugliness made it easier for that other, more deeply ingrained side of human nature to come out.

I had no cause at all to complain about my room-mate, Robert W. Duncan. He maintained his cheerful nature despite the disease, ignoring its traps and pitfalls. He was also fortunate that the illness progressed very slowly and only drew attention to itself – controlled by some inscrutable biological or divine clock – when he thought he was perhaps cured of it.

Robert made my years spent at the leprosarium seem shorter. He never forgot my birthday. He always gave me presents perfectly tailored to my tastes and needs. The most precious of them, the Jugoton pressing of the Beatles' White Album, will stay ingrained in my memory forever as the sound of kindness and undiminished friendship. I remember old Ingemar Zoltán listening to Back in the USSR beside the speaker and whooping with joy – he believed it was a propaganda piece, a march conveying an ultimatum to the Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest. Every day he marched up and down the corridors wanting more, joyfully shouting out a hybridised refrain full of anti-Soviet slogans.

Robert's presents had a mysterious aura of depth and intimacy about them. I would turn them fondly in my hands and had the strange feeling that I had owned them long ago and they had now come back to me, bringing back memories. A deck of old Piatnik playing cards, a pocket knife with a rosewood handle, a small ebony-framed Chinese watercolour, a Turkish pipe – each of these gifts had its own special place on my bedside table.

Robert stubbornly refused to say how he came by them, and after badgering him a few times I gave up. It was probably some special ability of his, like a literary or musical talent. Several days before my birthday I followed his movements closely, but Robert was never out of my sight for more than half an hour – not long enough to go to the nearest village or the fertiliser factory. Sometimes he would be walking in the courtyard and cast enigmatic smiles up at me, knowing that I was bursting to ask him one more time: how?

The present he gave me for my forty-second birthday on 2 April 1989 was kept not on my bedside table but deep inside the woollen filling of the mattress. Robert put it next to the alarm clock so I would see it when the Russian rocket rang hysterically, and when I saw it, my head rang with excitement too. It was a shock that turned the peaceful spring days into a torrent of doubts, assumptions and hopes. What was more, the huge portrait of Nicolae Ceauşescu, which for years had beamed down from the factory administration building, had been smeared beyond recognition with tar.

I shuffled the cards and looked towards the mountains in the west. Beyond the rim of the Transylvanian Alps lay Europe, sinking into another night. I felt it humming like a huge queen bee sending out series of encoded signals. When Robert stole up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder, the cards flew up from my frightened hands – and out the window. They fell slowly, it seemed, much too slowly, gliding through the thick spring air. I knew something was about to change.

Robert laughed at my jittery hands. He calmly opened two tins of pineapple rings, one for each of us, and I felt as if he was opening two Pandora's boxes. The next morning you could have seen me walking down the stairs carefully carrying a tin full of water – to fetch flowers, the splendid daffodils along the southern wall of the leprosarium.

But that was not the only reason I got up before the others on 16 April 1989.

CHAPTER TWO

It hurt when I swallowed the pineapple, but Robert said that was just a passing phase, after which my oesophagus would become totally numb. That is why lepers in the past often became performers who swallowed live coals or ate glass for money. He said I would get used to it over time, though I would miss the pleasant burning sensation of hot tea. What he missed most of all was the heart-warming burn of the Jim Beam Black he so adored. Robert was American. The only American on the planet infected with this ancient disease, I imagined. He wrote to a few friends and some old aunt in Georgia that he had AIDS and would be spending the rest of his life on the Old Continent. He wanted them to remember him as he had been – a non-commissioned officer of the US Army, not an enfeebled shadow of his former self. He told me he had picked up leprosy in the brothels of Amsterdam in 1982 and then quickly went on telling me episodes of his training in Arizona. I did not ask him any more questions, constrained by my good manners, though I knew that none of Hansen's children can explain how they contracted the disease in just one sentence. Their account is extensive and always precisely structured. Lepers talk nineteen to the dozen, at least at a superficial level, whenever they are asked how they arrived at their fate. Robert only told me the whole truth after I had been at the leprosarium for years, encouraged by our friendship.

The daffodils were always an unpleasant reminder of the topic of beauty and its reflection. I would not have been surprised if those magnificent flowers suddenly wilted at the sight of my disfigured face. Although I am not missing any vital parts, my nose, cheeks and forehead are covered with large warts, as if peas were growing under the skin. Leontiasis developed, with the result that my eyebrows, eyelashes, hair and beard growth have long since disappeared. But the cartilage of my nose is still in fairly good condition. This was thanks to regular doses of thiosemicarbazone and antimony drugs which were once delivered in abundance. You could do your injections whenever you wanted: before lunch, after breakfast, at dawn or in the middle of the night. The majority of residents adopted a loose regimen like this, not knowing what a double-edged sword it was. Mycobacterium leprae soon became immune to the medicines so that mammoth doses were needed to stop the progress of the bacillus even for only a short time. With Robert's help, I worked out exactly the right doses of medication to knock out Hansen in the long term. In 1984, the last ampoules of the precious substances ran out. We then switched to therapies with medicinal herbs which we were able to gather in the vicinity of the leprosarium. Several Russian books on herbal medicine helped us quickly work out the most effective infusions for reducing the swelling and painful lumps. Compresses of wild pansy leaves soothed the unbearable itch which came on rainy days and sometimes drove the lepers to claw their already disfigured bodies, producing volcanoes of pus and blood.

Thirty grams of peeled and chopped bittersweet stems steeped in a litre of boiling water gave an inconceivably bitter infusion which was good for relieving symptoms in the throat and oesophagus. We gathered the bark of young elm trees all year round in the nearby forest. This was the only plant for which the books provided recipes for alleviating the consequences and symptoms of leprosy, which made it the most popular with the patients. We peeled bark off the stems of two-year-old elms, dried it in an airy place or in the sun, and chopped it up finely. We boiled thirteen hundred grams in twenty litres of water until half the liquid had evaporated. Every morning we needed to drink two hundred and fifty

millilitres as tea and use the same amount for compresses. We made the infusion in two large cauldrons in the middle of the courtyard and sat around the fire. Old Zoltán had some culinary experience, and his skill in preparing the bark made the work a smooth operation. We would put the speaker on the windowsill and stock the fire well, everyone would bring out a stool or drag up a block of wood, and the fun began. Night after night the White Album revolved, making feet tap in spite of stiff knees; sparks flew up into the heavens followed by the dull eyes of the lepers.

Robert sometimes took a piece of wood as a microphone and pretended to be performing the magnificent Happiness is a Warm Gun. He enticed moving smiles, which our disfigured faces transformed into grotesque portraits of our grief. The music was turned down when our conversation became louder. Rasping voices would come from under the linen hoods; stories were told of their past lives, vitae of wretches who like witch doctors conjured up lost images and words from the dark limbos of time. No one ever questioned what was said. You could tell your story undisturbed by comments and doubts because everyone knew they would be in a similar situation too.

Whether these biographies were true was not ascertainable. When you arrived at the leprosarium, all documents, personal belongings and clothes were rudely taken off you, and in return you were given a handful of underwear, two pairs of white shirts, an army jumper and a quality linen robe with a large hood. New clothes were supplied at regular intervals, so no one could complain about poor hygiene. While three oh so amiable doctors accompanied by a Romanian army soldier prepared me for my stay at the leprosarium, I expected they would hang a bell around my neck – an essential accessory of lepers in earlier centuries which warned travellers that one of Them, deprived of the love of God, was coming along the road. Fortunately that did not happen. But there was something frighteningly decisive about their well-coordinated procedure. I realised that I was not being sent for treatment but being prepared for a different journey to somewhere outside the rules of this world, which could more appropriately be called illness in isolation than medical treatment. I wanted to keep my watch, passport and little golden Sagittarius pendant. When I raised this possibility, one of the doctors said with a gentle sneer that the things would be safer if they were looked after until my treatment was over.

At the same time one of his colleagues threw them into a large metal container while the other, with a mask on his face, rained a white powder over them. Two large needles sank into my thigh to release a strong antidepressant and my first dose of thiosemicarbazone. The doctor dialled the zero on the black disk and whispered into the receiver: 'He's ready.' They bundled me into a dilapidated ambulance. I tried to speak, but the injection had turned my words into gentle movements of my arms and a wrinkling of my forehead. My tongue rolled lamely in my mouth, making saliva run in strands down my chin and right to the floor. I leaned my face against the glass of the back door which had fine wire running through it. The small first-aid station on the outskirts of Bucharest would soon become a white dot with a blot of the red cross on the wall. A man who had not been around during the examination went out in front and leaned against the wall. He waved casually as we left. Wide-lapelled black clothing, a dishevelled jacket, a narrow, neatly shaven moustache above neat rows of teeth. It was this person, whom I later came to know as Mr Smooth, who had heard the doctor's 'He's ready' several minutes earlier and with satisfaction lit a cigarette. It hung in his left hand as we left.

As the ambulance rattled along the pockmarked roads on the way to the leprosarium, I sat on the wooden bench at the side, my back against the metal. The wire glass the size of a television screen emitted a pale sfumato of a winter landscape without snow. The villagers in their muddy fields rested their hands on the handles of their tools and watched the ambulance go past. An unnaturally ugly child ran up to the road and threw a stone that clanged against the metal. The driver stopped for a moment and threw back several Romanian swear words. We continued and turned right, into a forest of birch trees; I was lulled to sleep by the monotony of their white trunks bent by the northern wind.

As Robert later told me, Mr Smooth was an officer of the infamous Securitate who had recently been put in charge of all the lepers in the country. He saw to it that they reached their designated destination and, equally important – that they stay there.

The procedure for dealing with leprosy had not changed significantly throughout the several millennia of its known existence. Two simple conditions had to be fulfilled to prevent a drastic spread of the disease: Firstly, lepers' freedom of movement had to be severely restricted; secondly, they had to be prevented from coming into contact with the healthy. It was the same under Ramses II, Charles V or Ivan the Terrible.

In the Middle Ages, lepers sometimes made the acquaintance of the stake. Just tell common people about the ungodliness of the contagion and its carriers.

Since the church was not bound by compassion, lepers were forced to establish communities on the peripheries of settlements, seeking their salvation in refuse, medicinal herbs and sour wild fruits. With time these colonies would become restless and hordes of lepers would plunder nearby villages and rob people travelling to the city. This state of affairs would last several weeks or months depending on the resolve of the city dignitaries to saddle the guard's horses, light torches and go on a small crusade against the sons and daughters of the devil.

The events in Sensotregiore, a city of eight thousand souls one hundred kilometres from Florence, significantly contributed to changing the relationship to lepers in the sixteenth century. A colony of lepers located just a stone's throw from the city walls had been established in the late fifteenth century at the time of Pope Innocent VIII. The mild and above all dry climate made the area popular with the lepers of southern Europe, and it was nothing unusual for lepers to come from distant parts of Scandinavia, Spain or the British isles. A good supply of herbs, abandoned military stables and a network of roads which allowed companies of lepers to extort money and food helped the colony grow to a population of two or three thousand by the beginning of the sixteenth century. When a group of colonists brutally raped three under-aged girls – tales speak of them being butchered and eaten at the bacchanalias held that same evening – the city fathers, with the pope's blessing, gathered two hundred heavily armed mercenaries: a force intended to expel this perverted rabble and exact bloody punishment. A battle ensued, and blood-curdling cries were heard until the early hours; when the curious and vindictive inhabitants of Sensotregiore looked out at the battlefield in the morning light, they were horrified to see a well-ordered army of lepers holding up the heads of their enemies. Now the maddened horde yelled in fury as it converged on the city's fragile gates. Within two hours

Sensotregiore had become a Sodom at the mercy of the hungry and disfigured. The humiliated now indulged in all the worldly pleasures that had been denied them for years and gave their brutal impulses free rein. A frenzy of rape, plunder, loathsome orgies and cruel murders descended on the city, turning it into an inferno. The inhabitants, mad with fear of the disease, fled towards the northern gates and out into the hills.

The lepers soon imposed their rule and took over the comfortable homes of the dignitaries. At noon, four members of the city council were hanged on the main square; a mayor was elected, and Sensotregiore became a Lepropolis, a powerful community that functioned well thanks to the financial resources extracted from the hidden niches, mattresses and safes in the houses of the rich. No army existed that was prepared to attack a city in which leprosy reigned, of course. But the leper colonies throughout Europe were punished in revenge for Sensotregiore. Their wooden huts were burned down without mercy, and every soldier had tacit permission to kill or spare lepers as he saw fit. Not until a decade after the establishment of Lepropolis – by which time over two thirds of its inhabitants had succumbed to the disease – did this change: a host of three hundred cavalrymen and an equal number of well-armed infantry arrived at the city gates determined to put an end to Sodom and restore the divine order. Among the soldiers were many former inhabitants of Sensotregiore imbued with righteous rage and a burning hatred. Alerted by the fanfares and the rattle of weapons, the lepers left the city without a fight and made off into the mountains with the sabres of the victors behind them.

This was Robert's favourite tale, and he often told it at the fireside as when the others requested. He never failed to mention, after a final dramatic pause, that if you passed by the half-ruined citadel of that small Italian city today you could still hear the cries of our profligate brothers who had fallen into in sin.

The doctor shook me awake when we arrived at the gate of the leprosarium. I was given a personal hygiene kit and the driver offered me a cigarette. If I had accepted, I suppose he would have flicked it to me out the slightly opened window. Old Zoltán and Robert W. Duncan waited on the other side of the fence – and were the first people in several months to reach me their hands. We strode through thick layers of fallen leaves and stepped around frozen puddles. The leprosarium was a three-storey building with high ceilings. I saw dark silhouettes standing at several dimly lit windows. The third storey had small ventilation openings only and was used for storage.

The room was well heated, and several loads of finely chopped firewood lay stacked by the stone stove in the corner. There were flowers on the bedside table, a reproduction of the Raft of the Medusa above the bed and a crucifix at the head of the bed. Robert was visibly gladdened by my good English and chattered happily as he showed me around the building that was to be my only home for years to come. After pointing out where the bathroom was, he left me to unpack. Dinner was at eight thirty, the dining room was on the ground floor. I looked out the window and tried to catch a glimpse of the surroundings through the darkness, but all I saw were the flickering violet lights of the nearby fertiliser factory.

The corridors of the building were curved like crescents. Standing in the middle of a storey you could not see either of the ends. This confused me at first – I often went the wrong way and ended up at the locked door of the stairway that led up to the attic.

My first look into the dining room revealed a round table of enormous size set with simple plates and cutlery; patients in their dark-hooded robes sat at their places. When I entered I heard a friendly murmur of different languages and dialects, but no one stood up to greet me. Old Zoltán pointed to a vacant chair next to his, and at the same time Robert began introducing the other patients with whom I would 'share the good and the bad', as he put it. When their names were called out, each answered by pulling back his hood. One after another they emerged – heads crafted by leprosy, skulls covered with different textures of scarred and malformed tissue. Monsters they were, but they spoke with human voices, which created the impression that they were people wearing ghastly masks. Then I threw back my hood too.

I cannot claim to have had anything like rosy cheeks any more, but my skin was still fairly smooth with only a few rough patches caused by the beginnings of leprosy. The tendons on my neck trembled – a sign of recent health – and my hair had only just begun to fall out. All this provoked a minute of hushed envy and disbelief. Robert broke the silence by reaching for the oval dish of boiled vegetables and giving me a big helping.

We pulled our hoods back over our heads and the eating continued. The rest of the meal was seasoned with barely audible whispers further muffled by the linen hoods. The others served me food too, without missing the opportunity to look me in the eyes and inspect my hands, searching for explicit signs of the disease. They saw the beginnings of lumpy excrescences on the joints of my fingers as well as my veil-like cataract; they saw shining tears of desperation that dried and disappeared before they could roll. My mood gradually improved – I was accepted as a fully-fledged member of the community.

Later, back in the room, Robert tried to dispel the fear generated by my first major encounter with the disease. Leprosy did not have to progress any further than it already had, he explained; we would take a regular course of thiosemicarbazone and do all we could to lessen the effects of the disease. I did not share his optimism. One more visual encounter with the other patients at breakfast forced me to realise what an uncompromising monster dwelt within me.

I watched their faces as they chewed their fried eggs. Lumps of dead flesh shook like jelly and shone like grease. Their mutilated fingers looked like lumps of melted lead, and their sunken eyes cast reflections of the faint light that barely reached them. Some of them would interrupt their meal for a moment to remove pieces of food from their open sinuses, which elicited loud complaints from the others, so the poor noseless fellows would have to get up from the table and finish their dirty work out of sight.

The oldest denizen of Europe's last leprosarium was Zoltán who had lived there since it was founded in 1928. He was the only one to survive the German occupation and mass execution when forty-seven residents were taken out into a field and mowed down in a muddy pit.

He remembered the noise of the armoured vehicles on 14 December 1942, the iron gate being broken down, and the young soldiers of the 'Prinz Eugen' division determined to... Oh God, and were they determined.

Four young soldiers in protective suits ran up and down the corridors and ordered the still sleepy residents to stretch their legs and immediately go out the courtyard. They came out one after another, rubbing their eyes. The arrival of the Germans did not provoke any great panic, Zoltán explained. The residents were more surprised than anything else because at the leprosarium at that stage they did not quite know what was going on in the world outside. They assumed this was just another of the humiliating head-counts that the authorities conducted for fear of the patients fleeing and causing an epidemic. German soldiers armed to the teeth standing in the courtyard was, in the end, one more reason to hope for the introduction of order and proper medical care to alleviate the desperate conditions at the colony. But when the officer in charge pointed towards the gate with his Schmiesser and the first in the line of lepers was jabbed in the ribs with it and told to move, Zoltán realised that something other than ordinary medical treatment or a boring head-count was in store for them. The minute of machine-gun fire confirmed his doubts. Curled up under the two-year old elm trees close to the fence, Zoltán cried big cold tears that dripped to the ground. He wanted to pass away like his brothers, to nestle up to their bodies end this miserable life of a lazar in the backwoods of Romania.

The Germans carried out a thorough disinfection of the building by burning everything that would burn out in the courtyard. Several valuable portraits of Queen Marie of Romania were destroyed in the flames together with the pieces of valuable walnut-wood furniture; they and the pictures had been given to the leprosarium as presents of the crown. Zoltán watched as the blaze swallowed up painstakingly preserved mementoes. Photographs of friends and family as well as small but cherished items kept in drawers near the patients' bedheads all vanished amidst the red tongues of the Germans' fire.

That morning, Zoltán told us, his last hopes went up in smoke. Be it this country or the lands beyond the mountains that hummed like a fat queen sending out encoded signals – never would this world become a place worthy of God's love.

Until the end of the war Zoltán roamed the nearby forests; he slept in abandoned stables and burned-down houses. The Germans created a well-guarded headquarters in the leprosarium building, and the courtyard was patrolled not only by guards but also three bloodthirsty Alsatians. Zoltán did not dare to take a closer look.

On 17 April 1944, dawn found him in the stench of a chicken coop close to the main road. He was woken by that same humming of mighty machines and the incisive sounds of German. He waited for the soldiers to pass and then headed for the leprosarium with quick steps. Now in the courtyard a mighty blaze was devouring the belongings of the German soldiers, countless bundles of documents, epaulettes of various ranks, and large photographs of Adolf Hitler. The building remained untouched. Apart from a large swastika crudely daubed in tar on the front wall before the Nazis' withdrawal, there were no visible signs of destruction. On the contrary, the windows had been repaired, the bathrooms sanitised, and every room now had a small stone stove. Solid, functional furniture adorned the dining room which was polished to splendour, and in the kitchen the aromas of the last meal still hung in the air. Crockery bearing the mark of the Reich shone in the china closets. Zoltán touched it with his crooked fingers and looked at his reflection on the white porcelain surfaces.

In the corner of the dining room he spotted the bulging copper horn of a gramophone. He picked up one of records which lay scattered on the floor, wound up the spring and gently placed the stylus between the black grooves of Grieg's Piano Concerto. The music resounded as he donned the last remaining overcoat that hung in the corridor, as he tore the epaulettes and the Iron Cross from the breast. *Allegro molto moderato*: Zoltán goes outside to the southern wall to see if there were still any daffodils that usually grow there at that time of year. *Adagio*: Zoltán picks daffodils, angrily tearing them out of the ground. His cold tears drip on the resilient petals. *Allegro molte e marcato*: He slowly lays the flowers on the round depression in the ground not far from the leprosarium. *Aase's Death*: He lays himself on the warm spring earth, on the bodies of his leprous brothers that have turned to dust.

Ants feasted on the filth and sweat of Zoltán's unwashed body, carrying away these tasty morsels to the tiny passages of their subterranean home. After he had slept for several hours, he went and had a bath, bandaged his wounds with fresh bandages and went back to the resting place of his friends. Instead of saying a prayer, above their grave he read out the fifth chapter of the Second Book of Kings, in which Elisha heals Naaman of Syria, a leper, and punishes Gehazi by giving him leprosy. It is not hard to imagine who Zoltán had in mind when he spoke those Old Testament curses.

If you asked him why he decided to spend the rest of his life at the leprosarium, he would wave dismissively, 'I'm waiting for Death to come,' he would say resignedly, 'This is the only place where I can wait undisturbed.'

A commemorative lunch was held every 14 December to mark the death of our former fellow-sufferers; a minute's silence was observed and a joint prayer spoken at the mass grave. After telling the story for the umpteenth time, Zoltán would wipe away his tears with his thumb – the only healthy finger of his right hand – and go off to bed. We broke up in silence, moved and somehow proud that lepers had played a part in the Second World War, albeit through collective execution.

If Zoltán had cast off his documentarian chains for a moment and given his imagination free rein, he might have been able to spin a story about how, cowering under the elms, he had heard the defiant shouts of those prepared to die; he would say that they had started to sing the Internationale in unison in different languages until this was cut short by a burst of fire in the middle of the second stanza, for example. Since he was the sole survivor, and the post-war Communist authorities were eager to present myths of heroism, they would embrace his far-fetched tale with open arms. A charming memorial centre would be built nearby and the leprosarium would be given central heating.

As my coarse hands descended among the heads of the daffodils, I looked to the left and right to make sure I was the only leper awake that morning. I snapped the young stems and put the flowers in the cold water of the pineapple tin. The birthday present Robert gave me was hidden in my inside pocket. Seven daffodils. The seventh stone from the left in the sixth row from the bottom. I stuck in the piece of wood and dislodged the stone so I could grab it and pull it out. Robert advised me to 'push in steadily' and 'pull back slowly'. The stone creaked like an old mill wheel, I thought, though I had never been in a mill. It was heavier than I imagined. I put it down by my legs, rolled up my right sleeve as far as it would go, and reached my hand timidly into the dark hole. I breathed in the cold of the old wall and

expected something to touch me, but I did not feel anything. There was just the cold and the smell of moss. I took the present out of my pocket, laid it in the dark hole and then pushed the stone block in hard. Carefully I picked up the tin and went back to the room. I was excited; I felt as I had just planted a magic seed in the wall and wondered what kind of strange fruit would spring forth.

Translated from the Serbian by Will Firth