

Thomas Rejto

# THE RELUCTANT ADVENTURER

Translated by Laurent Rejto

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For information and orders, contact

Farmhouse Films

24 Pond Park Road

Woodstock, New York 12498

t. 845 679-0552

f. 509 479-5414

email: [info@farmhousefilms.net](mailto:info@farmhousefilms.net)

[www.farmhousefilms.net](http://www.farmhousefilms.net)

For  
my wife  
my family  
my friends

## **Thomas Rejto**

*My dear sons Laurent and Stephan:*

*Although I finished the manuscript of "Aventurier Malgré Soi" many decades ago, it is your questions that caused me to look into myself deeply enough to discover why I wrote the novel.*

*I navigated with closed eyes through the horrors of the Second World War. That was, probably, the only way to survive; logic was to no avail. But afterwards, on my first visit back to Hungary, I had to open my eyes and try to absorb all at once the terrible shock. Two thirds of my family had been exterminated by the Nazis, and Budapest was destroyed by the bombings. Nothing remained but memories from a happy youth, gone forever. The last, terrible words my father said to me before my forced departure, knowing that he would perish and feeling that I would survive, were buried deep in my soul. I tried not to remember, but it was not possible anymore. Those words were: "Bosszulj meg!" ("Avenge me!") At once I was filled with bitterness and rage. I sat down to write a tragedy. In the play "A Közönyösek" ("The Indifferents"), I extended the revenge not only to those responsible for the killings but also to those who just looked away.*

*I submitted the work to a Budapest theatre. An encouraging answer arrived some weeks later. But I had already returned to Paris. I left Hungary as soon as I discovered that the people who were busy in wholesale revenge weren't behaving much differently from those who had committed or instigated the original crimes. My spirit remained as low as before. The tuberculosis I contracted in the labor camp, which had been controlled until then without hospitalization, was unleashed by my anxiety.*

*I found myself in a sanatorium near Paris reserved for students, and remained there for nearly two years. I received excellent, loving care, and I had ample time to learn and to think. There, I wrote my first short stories in French. They were humorous writings, about me and my friends during our happy school years. I showed them to Joseph Kessel, a member of the "Académie Française" (the "famous writer" mentioned in the novel), who kindly came to visit me several times. He liked the stories and encouraged me to continue. I did, now in the form of an*

*autobiographic novel, and I purposefully maintained the humorous style, even when I described our life in the Nazi forced labor camp and in the Russian and Bulgarian prisons.*

*I discovered that for me, and for many of those who physically survived the Holocaust, mental survival depended on the ability to view life as a black comedy. I also understood that it was not by bloody "vendetta," but by being able to reconstruct a happy, productive life, that I could best avenge my father.*

*The words Joseph Kessel addressed to me, after reading the manuscript, stand as a confirmation of these thoughts: "Survivors should be entitled to laughter and happiness once they have buried their dead and said their prayers. The fact that your book propels this notion is what makes me love it so much."*

*In conclusion, it was the writing of a humorous book about the adventures and misadventures of a bunch of rather unholy, "unheroic" heroes which produced the catharsis I needed so desperately. I am confident that the book can offer solace to many of its readers.*

*Albert Camus (who was Chief Editor at Gallimard and was instrumental in the publication of my novel) told me, only half jokingly: "I found it refreshing to for once, read a cheerful horror story."*

*In an excerpt from his review in the well-known French satirical paper "Le Canard Enchaîné," René Lefèvre wrote: "...It is not enough not to dislike war. What is even more important is to sicken others over the very idea of it. In this field Thomas Rejto could very well succeed."*

*If I have, I am most proud of this.*

*Thomas Rejto*

## PRE-WWII MAP OF EUROPE AND ASIA MINOR



We covered 4,600 miles during our 30 month Odyssey.  
It took Ulysses 20 years to cover 3,000 miles.

# I

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Nineteen thirty-nine was still a relatively good year in Hungary. There were those who loved Germans and Poles equally and those who hated them both. And even though people's pockets were empty, the shops were filled with merchandise. A lot of naive people were still convinced that our country could stay out of the war.

It was my fourth year at the Marko Street Gymnasium in Budapest. The name of the school had nothing to do with physical education. It was an institution which, following an old tradition, purported to prepare one for a college education through eight years of mandatory Latin.

No more than about one in ten primary school children ever made it to these venerable institutions. Once you got into the school, a little common sense and a lot of patience usually sufficed for obtaining a diploma. If you wanted to continue on to University, you needed to be among the top students—a rather difficult standard to maintain.

At the tender age of thirteen, I was living under my mother's guidance and protection. I had no freedom whatsoever. If she could have, she would have swaddled me in cotton. To get dressed, I needed to get my mother's advice. After school, I had to hurry home for lunch. To go out again, I needed permission. As a matter of course, this was usually denied, since afternoons were strictly reserved for homework. As a result, I was a good student, always in the top ten. My grade book was filled with "A's." A "B" would sometimes slip in and create havoc at home. It was customary that every afternoon, an ugly schoolmistress would

come to supervise my work, but I had protested so much about her that for the new school year my parents had agreed to replace her with a tutor, the son of the local grocer and a recent graduate “with honors” of my venerable institution of learning.

Due to worldly events, the start of the school year was pushed back to the tenth of September. At a quarter to eight that morning, while the Germans stood at the gates of Warsaw, I stood at the gates of my school, waiting for them to open.

I would usually arrive at eight o'clock on the dot. My father would always drive me in his car. It was a convenience which permitted me to sleep a little bit longer every morning. To arrive fifteen minutes early that day, I had to solicit special permission from my mother and give a very valid reason. I had a good one. There were too many students in my school, and they would stuff as many of us as possible—up to fifty—in every classroom. We were packed, two by two, into three long columns of ancient brown and green desks. Whatever seat you chose the first day would be assigned to you for the rest of the year. Consequently, it was necessary to arrive early unless you wanted to be relegated to the back of the room.

I didn't think it necessary to let my mother know that in my opinion the fourth seat in the center row would be, for me, the most advantageous—it wasn't overly exposed to the teacher's desk.

I knew that the best students never hurried. The reason I ran through the deserted hallways on the first day of every September was so I could seat myself in the fourth seat of the center row and reserve the seat next to mine. That way, when an “egghead” walked in at the last moment to find the classroom filled, he would sit next to me.

So, at ten minutes to eight that morning, I was all alone in the classroom in the fourth seat in the center aisle. By placing my cap, which was embellished with a goose feather, on the seat next to mine, I secured it while eyeing the door with the hope that “Genius John,” last year's neighbor and savior, would arrive at just the right moment. Instead,

## THE RELUCTANT ADVENTURER

a guy I'd never seen before showed up. He was about a foot taller than me and about twice my width. I called out to him, "Hey, the senior classes are on the third floor!"

His answer was brisk. He made his way toward me, swept my cap off the seat and sat down next to me! Bashfully, I tried to protest. "Uh, didn't you notice...that seat is reserved?"

He turned toward me. "You want me to break your face?"

I knew immediately that this was not the egghead I had been waiting for. He didn't look like a good student at all. I was in a bind. The classroom was filling up. Should I change seats? All my plans were going down the drain and, in addition, I risked offending this big lout. I told myself that a good "whisperer" could be as helpful as a good neighbor, so I quickly retrieved my cap and placed it on the seat behind mine. Now that I'd saved the situation, all I had to do was sit and wait for the newcomer to talk to me. He never did. Instead, he pulled out a thriller and started to read.

At five minutes to eight—when almost all the seats had already been taken—Kacsa entered. His physical strength, combined with his total lack of scruples, made him the terror of the class. Even though his father was a well-to-do ear, nose and throat specialist, he never paid for his school supplies. Instead, he would simply ask one of us, "Can I have your pencil?"

One never refused such a request.

Then Kacsa would add, "Have you said goodbye to your pencil?"

"Why?" one would ask shyly. "Aren't you going to give it back?"

"No," would come the reply. "I won't!"

"But, why?"

"Because I'm stronger than you!"

And then, like that, he would round up pencils, paintbrushes, notebooks, and pads and terrorize the entire class.

The lout to my left was immediately impressed. "Hmm,

that guy's got a good head. Get rid of your cap!"

"Huh, no, not him!" I replied. "He's worthless."

And then, helplessly, I admitted my motive. "He doesn't know anything about math or Latin or—"

"There's more to life than math or Latin!"

That was his answer! And then, with a smile and a nudge, he pointed out the seat I'd been reserving for a "brain" to Kacsá, who, in his usual offhanded way, placed his big fat behind right on top of my goose-feathered cap.

Genius John finally arrived. Without even looking at me, he sat down at the last available desk in the back of the room. A young, bespectacled, thoughtful-looking man followed. We all stood, even though we were uncertain about his status. From the looks of it, he could have been an older student held back a grade. He stared at us for a moment, then started speaking with the tedious mannerisms of molasses. "I...am...your...new...head teacher. I have been appointed to teach you mathematics and physics."

Another disaster! In spite of my weak aptitude for the mathematical sciences, I had maintained a good rapport with our former teacher.

The new one continued his discourse: we shouldn't expect him to be like his predecessor, who, he had learned, had been too lenient. From now on, everything would be different; it would be best to start studying without delay. That said, he started writing the data for an impossible, complex equation on the blackboard. Gloomily, I took out my class book. The guy next to me, who had reimmersed himself into his novel, considered this the perfect time to start up a conversation. He turned his head towards me. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Tamas."

"My name is Istvan."

I shushed him. "Can't you see that the teacher is writing an equation on the board?"

He continued, unmoved by my plea. "You don't really take this nonsense seriously, do you? Are you a good student?"

Prey to my somber apprehensions, I confessed, "I used

to be..."

He looked at me with a frown. "Do you have a mistress?"

"Oh!" I said. "They're such a pain. I like men better."

"So you're gay?"

I turned red. "But...no!" Then scarlet.

I wanted to explain that I preferred doing my homework with my new tutor, a man, rather than my old schoolmistress, but he was already reassuring me. "You don't have to be ashamed. It takes all kinds to make the world go round."

"But no, I swear. I thought you were asking me if I do my homework with a schoolmistress."

Then, with a look of disgust, he said, "Oh, so you're innocent. That's much worse. I should have known!"

The teacher must have noticed us for suddenly he was coming down from the rostrum and advancing slowly to my seat. I could feel the cold sweat glistening on my brow. He pointed to the blackboard. "You! Continue!"

I was too weak to stand. "Please, forgive me, Professor (they liked being called Professor in my school), sir, I don't understand it very well...uh...it's a little difficult for me."

"Well, then maybe your neighbor can help you out?"

The lout stood up and solved the equation with disconcerting ease. I was vanquished in a flash.

Almost immediately Istvan would demonstrate the consequences of his preeminence. During recess, I wanted to see some old friends, so I left the classroom. By the time I returned, my mid-morning snack had disappeared. The goose liver pate sandwich Istvan was eating looked a lot like the one my mother had prepared for me. I backed off when he suddenly screamed at me aggressively, "You bastard. Did you steal my snack?"

My hunger had put me in a bad mood, but the principles of humility that my mother had inculcated in me applied to the situation. So it was with a look of sorrow that I replied, "You don't really think I'm a thief, do you? Besides, I just saw you finish your snack!"

"That was yours, idiot!"

Then he noticed Kacska standing in the corner ingesting a huge ham sandwich. "Wait a second!" he said. "I think I found it."

When Istvan tapped him on the shoulder, Kacska turned around dauntlessly. He had never before been subjected to a challenge in class.

"What d'you want?" he asked.

"This!" replied Istvan, and he smashed him in the face.

An all-out battle broke loose, the fiercest one I'd ever witnessed. As the two wrestled on the floor, they knocked over everything in their path. Out of fair play, they used only their hands in the fight, but they did so with extreme savagery, jabbing, twisting, digging, punching, gripping, squeezing.

"Let me show you how my father rips tonsils out," Kasca shouted while shoving his fist into Istvan's mouth.

When Istvan got the upper hand, he tightened his grip around his foe's neck and calmly uttered that he was measuring the girth so he could prepare a noose to hang Kasca with.

I feared that one of them would be killed, but when the warning came that the Latin teacher was on his way, they separated in a split second. Their school uniforms in rags, they seemed happy with the sweaty, bloody outcome.

I was thunderstruck. There was something about all this that overwhelmed me.

The following hours permitted me to comprehend the degree of emancipation Kacska and Istvan had acquired. The Latin professor, a dotard, thought that "in order to get us to work," he would lighten his first lesson with numerous anecdotes which he—and he alone—judged humorous. We played his game, and whenever incited we produced tumultuous outbreaks of laughter. Kacska tried to outdo the rest of the class. After a particularly long-lasting outbreak of hilarity, he got up and said: "Your honor, Sir (a designation which more than flattered the old fart), your lesson is so witty that the guy next to me can't stop laughing. Your honor, should I accompany him to the nurse's office?"

Istvan, a born agitator, demonstrated a different, more

sophisticated technique. He took advantage of the uproar to yell out with impunity, "Idiot! Imbecile! Get out of here! I can't believe people like you get to be teachers. It's a scandal!"

This prolonged our enthusiasm for a long while, during which Istvan continued throwing insults.

It came close to ending in a bad way when the principal of the school suddenly appeared in the middle of a thunderous outbreak. Everyone immediately shut up, except Istvan, whose voice could be heard in the sudden silence. "Idiot! Get the hell out of here!"

Fortunately, the principal was a bit hard-of-hearing, so no repercussions followed.

In this overcharged atmosphere, the last of my doubts melted away. I decided it was essential for me to ally myself with Istvan and Kacsá. As if this was a foregone conclusion, I felt an immediate sense of pride, which was enhanced during the next lesson, when I learned that Istvan even excelled in Hungarian literature.

In German language class, Istvan and Kacsá talked to each other nonstop. I was resentful, not because they made it impossible for me to follow the lesson, but because they excluded me from their conversation.

When the school bell rang at one o'clock, I found myself standing between them outside in front of the school. Kacsá patted his belly and said, "I'm treating. Let's go get some cakes."

I sheepishly interjected, "I have to go home for lunch."

"So scram, you little baby. Go and have your soup!"

This was no time for indecision. It was the moment of truth. After all, I told myself, I'm a young man now, almost an adult.

Kacsá took us to a place I'd never seen before. It was a large cellar that was chock-full of cakes! Eclairs, napoleons, doughnuts, cream puffs... I didn't particularly like cakes, but the temptation was dizzying. The pastry chef welcomed Kacsá with an apprehensive smile. Kacsá, on the other hand, was completely at ease. "Go ahead," he told us, "eat as much as you want to!"

At the risk of suffocation, I devoured two eclairs and two napoleons. Kacsá, meanwhile, attacked an entire tray of cream puffs; he had at least sixteen of them. Istvan preferred doughnuts and eclairs. For forty-five minutes, they went on stuffing themselves. Finally, Kacsá said: "Okay! That's enough for today. Let's go pay."

I was stunned when I heard both Istvan and Kacsá tell the cashier that they had eaten only one cake each. I told the cashier I had eaten three. Kacsá paid the bill. Once outside, he turned to me and said, "Hey, moron, you owe me for the two extra cakes I had to buy for you."

"But it's dishonest! You shouldn't lie about how much you've eaten!"

Istvan looked at me with chagrin. "My poor, poor friend, you really don't understand anything about life, do you? Besides, didn't you eat four cakes? So you lied anyway!" he pointed out. "I'm off. See you tomorrow."

I hurried away. It was twenty minutes after two when I got home. My mother was waiting on the doorstep. "Where have you been?"

"We got out late today, very late. And, by the way, I'm not hungry. You should have started lunch without me."

My blunt reply surprised her, but she stood firm. "So you got out late? Why is it then that Peter has been home for at least an hour?"

Peter was a classmate who lived in the same apartment building. Usually, we came home together. There was nothing I could say. My mother threatened, "Do you want me to slap your face?"

I don't know what came over me. I looked her right in the eyes and said, "You wouldn't dare."

She had dared every week before, if not every evening, but this time was different. She must have seen something in my eyes. Her menacing hand remained suspended in midair.

I asked myself at that moment whether I had won my freedom or simply exchanged one dictator for another.

When I sat at the table, my father gave me a disapproving look. I loved my father. He was in his fifties. His

scant hair had turned silver. As head of a large company, he filled his employees with terror whenever he raised his voice. At home, in the presence of my mother, he was hardly ever heard from. After lunch, he would read the morning paper. At night, when he got home from the club where he played cards, he ate quietly, read the evening paper, then started to work on the files he'd brought home from the office. That was the routine of his life except for two nights a week, when he would take my mother out to play gin rummy at the local lodge.

I respected him without being afraid of him. I feared my mother's slaps, but my father's sermons, which were reserved for particularly serious occasions, stirred my soul. Right at the moment, however, as I looked at him, I was dreading a soulful lecture. But he must have judged the incident to be of minor importance. "So, how was school?" he asked.

"Very good, Father."

"And your friends, were they happy to see you again?"

He was convinced that my friends were thrilled to put an end to their vacation just so they could see me again.

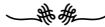
"Who are you sitting next to?"

"You don't know him. He's new, and very...talented."

I didn't add that his talents were much more of a physical than scholastic nature.

"Good," he said. "Now eat."

I forced myself to somehow swallow the soup, the meat, and the vegetables. I passed on dessert.



At three o'clock Orban, the new tutor, arrived. He was often cited in my house as a fine example. "Do you see," my father would ask, "how Orban, though raised in poverty, has been able to make his parents proud? You should follow his example."

It had been arranged that he would come for two hours each afternoon. That day, he must have thought he was tutoring a particularly poor student. My thoughts were everywhere but on my work. I kept hearing Istvan's voice: "So, you're gay?... You're innocent?!... That's much worse!"

*Thomas Rejto*

At 4:30 I convinced Orban to leave, since I didn't have any homework yet. Then, I went to find my mother. "I have to go out and get some notebooks."

It was a valid reason that she couldn't refuse.

"But come back as soon as you get them," she said as I left.

As an alibi, I bought two notebooks at the bookstore around the corner. Then, I roamed the streets and parks until seven o'clock. When I got home, my mother's face was worn with concern. "Where were you?"

"I went for a walk."

I was positive that she wouldn't slap me, but I expected some sort of reprimand. Instead, her voice was filled with distress. "Weren't you cold, my son? The evenings have become so breezy... Let me get you some tea."

Supper went on as usual. Afterward, my father gave me, as he did every Monday evening, a large silver coin, my allowance of five pengos. "Use it wisely," he would always say.

Actually, I never used them at all. The coins accumulated in my piggy bank, which now contained one hundred and twenty pengos.

Monday was gin rummy night at the lodge. As usual, my mother made my father change his tie three times. At nine o'clock, they finally headed out, after telling me to go to bed early so I could wake up on time in the morning.

I hastily put my pajamas on, but it wasn't to go to bed. A devilish idea—which I found ingenious—had come to me. I lay down on my stomach and hid the coin my father had given me under the chest of drawers. Then I tiptoed over to reach the service bell that hung from the chandelier. After some hesitation, I rang it.

Being a maid in Hungary was like being a slave. For fifty pengos a month, the poor girls had to be at their masters' disposal day and night. They were generally put up in a small room behind the kitchen, and for the sake of uniformity they were all called Mariska, just as cows were always baptized Riska.

Our Mariska was a peasant girl of eighteen with a rosy

## THE RELUCTANT ADVENTURER

complexion, radiant health, and a lavishly abundant shape. I had always called her “Mariska the Miraculous” because she had survived our home more than a year, which was a miraculous feat. Ordinarily, my mother would dismiss maids on a regular basis after two months—unless they asked to be released earlier.

Mariska showed up a few seconds after the bell rang. “What would you like?” she asked with her throaty but benevolent voice.

I appeared totally confused. “Mariska, I dropped a five-pengo coin under the chest and I can’t reach it. Can you please look for it?”

She got on her hands and knees to look under the chest. I closed my eyes, counted to three, then jumped on her. “You’re much too old for piggyback rides,” she said.

“That’s not what I want, Mariska,” I answered.

“Oh, so you want to wrestle?”

Before I could answer, she had flipped me over on my back and pinned me. She then lifted me up as though I were light as a feather and lowered me down on to my bed. “Here’s your money,” she said. “Now, sleep well.”

How could she even think that a young man like me could sleep well without having a mistress!