

LEAVING BEREHOVO

an extract
from

CHASING SHADOWS
by
Hugo Gryn and Naomi Gryn

dramatised
by

David Ian Neville

Characters:

OLDER HUGO - narrator. (early 20s or older).

YOUNG HUGO - aged 10.

BELLA - Hugo's mother, early 30s.

GÉZA - Hugo's father, early 30s.

HERSHU – Young Hugo's cousin. (about 10)

DÉNES – Young Hugo's friend. (about 10)

SARA – Young Hugo's cousin. (about 10)

A TEACHER – Hungarian.

Children of Berehovo.

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SCENE 1: THE GRYN HOME, BEREHOVO

MUSIC: Stetl Belz or Szal a Kakas Mar (Muzikas album Maramaros: The Lost Jewish Music of Transylvania).

BELLA (Hugo's mother), A YOUNG LADY IN HER EARLY THIRTIES ENTERS AND PUTS A CLEAN TABLE CLOTH ON THE TABLE. SHE PLACES A LARGE PIECE OF PAPER ON THE TABLE AND SOME DRAWING PENCILS. SHE WALKS DOWN STAGE LEFT AND LOOKS WISTFULLY OUT OF THE 'WINDOW' (IMAGINED - SET AT FRONT OF STAGE).

DURING THE FOLLOWING NARRATION, A BOY - YOUNG HUGO - AGED ABOUT TEN ENTERS AND SITS AT THE TABLE AND BEGINS DRAWING.

STAGE RIGHT OLDER HUGO APPEARS AND SPEAKS STRAIGHT OUT TO THE AUDIENCE. MUSIC FADES UNDER AS HUGO SPEAKS.

OLDER HUGO: (NARR) I remember that November day in 1938 when Berehovo's life, as I knew and loved it, came to an end. Indeed, I remember it as if it happened yesterday.

BELLA GOES TO THE SIDE AND RETURNS WITH A GLASS OF LEMONADE AND SETS IT DOWN ON THE TABLE BESIDE YOUNG HUGO. SHE GENTLY STROKES HIS HAIR AND HE LOOKS UP AND SMILES AT HER. SHE SMILES BACK THEN TURNS AWAY AND HER FACE BECOMES MORE ANGUISHED. YOUNG HUGO RESUMES DRAWING.

(NARR) Early in the morning, the sight of the Czechoslovakian flag, which was taken down in a muted ceremony in the centre of the Big Market, put me into a very depressed mood. That flag was the only thing I could draw properly. The flagpole itself was surrounded by a small group of soldiers and their officers, who looked every bit as dispirited as I felt.

Slowing they marched to waiting lorries around the corner, climbed into them and on to a few motor-cycles, and drove off in the direction of Mukačevo without any fanfare.

YOUNG HUGO STANDS UP AND SHOWS HIS DRAWING TO BELLA - IT IS THE CZECH FLAG. HE ROLLS IT INTO A TELESCOPE AND LOOKS OUT TO THE AUDIENCE. FROM THE BACK OF THE HALL A SMALL GROUP OF CHILDREN HIS AGE COME MARCHING ON PLAYING HUNGARIAN SOLDIERS - THEY HAVE STICKS ON THEIR SHOULDERS TO REPRESENT RIFLES. ONE OF THEM BANGS AN IMPROVISED DRUM (A POT?)AND ONE OF THEM IS SHOUTING 'LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT'

AT THE BACK OF THE HALL THIS BEGINS PLAYFUL AND CHILDLIKE BUT BY THE TIME THEY GET TO THE STAGE THE TONE OF THE 'SERGEANT' HAS BECOME REAL AND THE 'SOLDIERS' FACES ARE EXPRESSIONLESS. ONSTAGE THEY FALL INTO LINE WITH HUGO WHO STANDS TO ATTENTION AND BECOMES PART OF THE SQUAD OF SOLDIERS.

- OLDER HUGO:** (NARR) It was not long after the arrival of the Hungarians that all kinds of changes could be seen. There were the obvious things. We were no longer taught Czech at school. The shop signs became exclusively Hungarian and the prices were now in pengó - Hungarian currency. The majority of Jews in Berehovo - now called, Beregszasz - were also Hungarian speaking, so they believed at this early stage that their situation would not change radically.
- BELLA:** (NARR) But we knew that in Hungary proper there had already been years of so-called 'Jewish Laws' at work.
- GÉZA(HUGO'S FATHER):** (NARR) Of course they were really *anti*-Jewish laws and very much modelled on the Nuremberg Laws, already operational in Germany since 1933.
- HUGO:** (NARR) There were some Hungarian 'Jew Laws' which had started as early as the 1920s.
- BELLA:** (NARR) They limited the number of Jews in higher education, in some of the learned professions, and ownership of certain kinds of land.
- GÉZA:** (NARR) But if the Jewish community of Hungary had come to tolerate them and somehow work out a *modus vivendi*, it was widely believed in Berehovo that in time, so would we, because it was not very long before some of these 'Jew Laws' also became operational in Carpathia.

HUGO: (NARR) The first of these laws, which had a sudden and most unwelcome impact on the Jewish community, concerned licences for business and workshops. The Hungarian word *ipar* (licence) was on everyone's lips.....

GÉZA SITS AT THE TABLE WITH AN ACCOUNT BOOK
ADDING UP. BELLA APPEARS WITH SHOPPING.

BELLA: Géza, you should hear the talk in the market.....

GÉZA: (LAUGHS) Since when did I need to hear the talk in the market? You are my eyes and ears in Berehovo.

BELLA: This is no time for jokes, I'm worried.

GÉZA: Ssh....not so loud, the boys are home.....

BELLA: The queues at the Town Hall are stretching all the way around the building. Eva Katz's husband has been there three days running and they're still not giving him a licence....

GÉZA: He needs a licence for the hut? It's hardly got a roof on it.

BELLA: He's the best blacksmith in Berehovo and the nicest.

GÉZA: With the least head for business.

BELLA: That's part of his problem. They're asking him for this document and that document to prove the hut really is his...

GÉZA: It's been in his family for generations. So long it's a wonder it's still standing.

BELLA: If he can't show them documents they won't give him a licence. (BEAT) When are you going to go and register, Géza? You must do it.

GÉZA: There's time.....all in good time.

YOUNG HUGO ENTERS

YOUNG HUGO: Mama, what did you bring from the market?

- BELLA:** (SHE FORCES A SMILE) Just sweetness for you and Gabi...
- YOUNG HUGO:** Let me see. (HE STARTS LOOKING IN HER BAG) Did father tell you about Mr. Szusz, they're all going on a big ship....
- BELLA:** (WORRIED)What? Géza?
- GÉZA:** Hugo!
- YOUNG HUGO:** Have I said something wrong, father?
- GÉZA:** Go and play with Gabi, now.
- YOUNG HUGO:** I'm sorry, I didn't mean....
- GÉZA:** Mm. Don't worry Hugo, you've done nothing wrong. Now please.....leave us.
- YOUNG HUGO LOOKS AT HIS MOTHER AND RUNS OFF
- BELLA:** You weren't going to tell me! Your business partner decides to up and leave the country and you weren't going to.... How could Emil do this? And at such a time?
- GÉZA:** Everyone must make their own choices. Most of his family are already in Canada. He feels it's for the best.
- BELLA:** So he's leaving you to run the timber business? While he's sailing the high seas you'll be queuing for the licence at the Town Hall on your own?
- GÉZA:** Bella, I never meant to keep anything from you. Our application is already in.....it's taken days and yes they're sending us round in circles. I don't blame Emil - he thinks there's no future for us here anymore.
- BELLA:** And you?
- GÉZA:** Who knows? Let's pray and hope, you must always have hope.
- BELLA:** And meanwhile you have to jump through hoops by yourself to get the licence to run your business?

- GÉZA:** Not quite by myself. I've made Havel a partner.
- BELLA:** Havel, the bookkeeper?
- GÉZA:** I've given him a nominal share in the business. He's a good hard working Hungarian with not a trace of Jewish blood in his body.....
- BELLA:** I don't understand?
- GÉZA:** I have it on the best authority that if there's a non-Jewish partner in the business you get the licence without any fuss.
- BELLA IS ON THE POINT OF TEARS, GÉZA HUGS HER.
- GÉZA:** We'll be fine, you'll see. Everything passes.
- AS GÉZA HUGS BELLA HIS FACE LOOKS PAINED WITH WORRY.
- OLDER HUGO:** (NARR) My father did his best to keep life as normal as possible for us. And the timber business continued to function as it had always done. But soon I was to find myself directly affected by the changes and in such a way that my father could not protect me completely.
- SCENE 2: OUTSIDE THE GRYN HOME, BEREHOVO
- HERSHU:** I don't understand a word of it.
- SARA:** Oh come on, Hershu, don't give up.
- DÉNES:** If Hugo can get the complete history of Hungry into his brain for this test so can you.
- HERSHU:** It's no use.
- YOUNG HUGO:** Hershu you have to study.... You always help me with my Torah study, you're good at that.
- HERSHU:** It means something to me.
- SARA:** Well you can learn a lot from history.

HERSHU: Does what the Hungarians got up to in the twelfth century matter?

SARA: It's what they're getting up to now that really matters. But history tells us a lot about them.

HERSHU: So will things get better or worse?

YOUNG HUGO: My father keeps saying we must have hope and all the trouble will pass.

DÉNES: Everything will pass.

HERSHU: Even this exam to get into the Gymnasium?

SARA: It'll all be over by the end of tomorrow!

DÉNES: And maybe that's not even worth all this worry now they're only letting three Jews a year in.

YOUNG HUGO: But it's the best school if you want to go on to university.

SARA: Can you imagine us all at the university one day?

HERSHU: I think I'll need a miracle to get there!

SARA: (LAUGHS) Oh Hershu!

BELLA: (NARR) There had never been any doubt that our Hugo was Gymnasium material.

GÉZA: (NARR) And after that university. He had always been a hard working boy and naturally we wanted him to go to the best school in Berehovo.

BELLA: (NARR) Who wouldn't want their children to go to the best school?

ALL THE CHILDREN ENTER FROM THE SIDES HEADS
BURIED IN TEXT BOOKS

HERSHU: I'll never cram enough into my head for this exam.

YOUNG HUGO: What's the square root of three hundred and forty two?

DÉNES: Hungary borders Romania in the East....

SARA:and Austria in the West.....

YOUNG HUGO: When was the first Hungarian Revolution?

HERSHU: November 1918.

YOUNG HUGO: No.

SARA: Think Hershul!

HERSHU: I just can't remember anything.

YOUNG HUGO: The first Hungarian Revolution, anyone?

DÉNES: 1848 – the nationalists proclaimed self-government.

YOUNG HUGO: Correct.

DÉNES: Who crushed the Revolution?

HERSHU: The Czechs?

DÉNES: No!

YOUNG HUGO: The Austrians.

DÉNES: With.....

YOUNG HUGO: ...the help of the Russians?

DÉNES: Yes!

SARA: Well done Hugo!

HERSHU: But Hungary was declared a Republic in 1918, wasn't it? Tell me I've got something right, please.

YOUNG HUGO: Yes there was another revolution after the war.

HUGO: (NARR) We all spent days cramming in everything we could about the history and geography of Hungary.

GÉZA: (NARR) I gave Hugo endless mental arithmetic tests.

BELLA: (NARR) The children were burning the midnight oil until the day of the entrance examination.

SUDDENLY A HUNGARIAN TEACHER APPEARS
DRESSED IN A GOWN. HE'S TALL, SEVERE AND
READY TO STAND NO NONSENSE.

TEACHER: (CLAPS HANDS) Put these books down and go and take your seats.

ALL THE CHILDREN MARCH QUICKLY TO A
DIFFERENT PLACE - AT THE FRONT OF THE
STAGE/TWO SITTING AT EITHER END OF THE
TABLE/AND EVEN AT THE SIDES OF THE HALL. AS
THE TEACHER SPEAKS THEY BECOME MORE
TERRIFIED.

TEACHER: Don't touch the paper yet and leave those pencils alone. Sit up straight. No talking, no looking, no turning round, no fidgeting, no daydreaming. Pencils ready! Standby! You have two hours to complete all the questions. You must leave no question unanswered and you must use your best hand writing. The Gymnasium does not need untidy children. Untidy writing, untidy minds. Pencils ready! Three, two, wait for it....one! Begin.

YOUNG HUGO: (NARR) I wrote furiously for two whole hours.....

DÉNES: (NARR) I was in a cold sweat most of the time.

SARA: (NARR) My mother told me to stay calm and pace myself.

HERSHU: I can't remember a thing! Not a thing! Wake up brain!

TEACHER: SILENCE! Hand in your papers and leave the hall in an orderly fashion.
THE CHILDREN HAND HIM THEIR PAPERS AND WALK
OFF THE ACTING AREA.

TEACHER: (CALLING AFTER THEM) You will get the results in two or three days. Don't pin your hopes on it! We only take the very best.

HE WALKS OFF TAKING A QUICK LOOK AT THE TOP
PAPER AND SCORES OUT SEVERAL ANSWERS AS HE
WALKS.....

TEACHERS: (GOING) Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!

SCENE 3: THE GRYN HOME, BEREHOVO
BELLA PUT THE TABLECLOTH BACK ON THE TABLE. YOUNG HUGO ENTERS AND SITS. SHE STROKES HIS HEAD.

BELLA: If you did your best that's all your father would ask of you.

YOUNG HUGO: They said we'd hear in a couple of days and we've heard nothing.

BELLA: Has Denes heard anything?

YOUNG HUGO: No.

BELLA: Well there you are, silly!

GÉZA ENTERS WITH SOME MAIL

GÉZA: It's here! A letter addressed to Master H. Gryn from the Gymnasium.

YOUNG HUGO: What does it say?

GÉZA: Ah young man you have to open it yourself, here.

YOUNG HUGO SLOWLY OPENS THE ENVELOPE, HE LOOKS AT THE LETTER.

BELLA: Well? What does it say?

YOUNG HUGO: It says.....95% I got 95%.

GÉZA: I knew you would pass without a problem.

BELLA: My little hard working Hugo! Mazel Tov!

BELLA KISSES YOUNG HUGO

BELLA: So now you really are going to the Gymnasium.

YOUNG HUGO: No Mother, I still have to be interviewed before they officially offer me a place.

BELLA: What?

GÉZA: It's a formality. You'll have no bother with that, Hugo. With your wit, knowledge and charm.

BELLA: My little genius!

**THEY ALL HUG EACH OTHER AND LAUGH. THEN
SUDDENLY THEY FREEZE AND REMAIN VERY STILL**

OLDER HUGO: (NARR)How I wish it had been that straight forward. The teacher conducting the interview wore thick glasses and was very severe. He repeated every question two or three times. But it was how he addressed me that really took me off guard. I had never experienced anything like it before.

Scene 4: The interview
**DURING THE ABOVE NARRATION. BELLA REMOVES
THE CLOTH FROM THE TABLE. BOTH BELLA AND
GÉZA EXIT. YOUNG HUGO SITS AT THE TABLE AS IF
HE WAS IN CLASS. THE TEACHER ENTERS AND
BEGINS THE INTERVIEW**

TEACHER: So you think you are the right sort for the Gymnasium, do you?

YOUNG HUGO: Yes sir.

TEACHER: We'll soon find out. Who led the opposition to the Habsburg rule in 1848? Who led the opposition to the Habsburg rule in 1848?

YOUNG HUGO: Ferenc Deák.

TEACHER: And?

YOUNG HUGO: Lajos Kossuth.

TEACHER: And? And?

YOUNG HUGO: István Széchenyi.

TEACHER: What is your father's work, Jew boy?

YOUNG HUGO: P...p..pardon?

TEACHER: Aren't you paying attention Jew boy? Does your father have a job Jew boy?

YOUNG HUGO: He has a timber business, many people work for him....

- TEACHER:** So what does this little Jew boy want to do when he grows up? Cut wood?
- YOUNG HUGO:** I...I....thought of a career as a research chemist, or possibly in forestry....I....
- TEACHER:** Does a Jew child like you really expect to gain admittance to a university?

THE TEACHER BEGINS TO MOVE AWAY WALKING OFF THE ACTING AREA TOWARDS THE BACK OF THE HALL

Come by the school in three days time Jew boy and you will see the names of those who have got in posted on the board.

YOUNG HUGO SITS AT THE TABLE SHAKING. HIS FATHER APPEARS AND PUTS AN ARM ON HIS SHOULDER.

- GÉZA:** Sticks and stones, Hugo. Sticks and stones.
- OLDER HUGO:** (NARR)We waited until Friday for the results. My brother Gabi and I cycled to the school. One column on the notice board was headed, 'Jewish Students'. There were only three names. Dénes had got a place, and another boy I knew, and then there was my name.....

SCENE 5: THE GRYN HOME, BEREHOVO

GÉZA ENTERS CARRYING SOME BOOKS. YOUNG HUGO SITS AT THE TABLE. HUGO IS LOOKING WORRIED - GÉZA TRIES TO CARRY ON AS IF THERE IS NOTHING WRONG.

- GÉZA:** So many books to get for our wonderful new scholar.
- YOUNG HUGO:** How will I ever be able to carry them all?
- GÉZA:** We'll get a brand new satchel made for you and you'll be the smartest boy in the year.

YOUNG HUGO LOOKS THROUGH ONE OF THE BOOKS WITHOUT REALLY CONCENTRATING

GÉZA: You'll have so many fascinating new subjects to learn about.....and the teachers are meant to be the best in Carpathia. (BEAT) Hugo?

YOUNG HUGO: (WORRIED)I've proved I'm good enough for the Gymnasium.

GÉZA: Of course you have. All your hard work has paid off.

YOUNG HUGO: Father? The teacher at the interview.....will all the teachers be like him?

GÉZA: One would hope not.

YOUNG HUGO: Why can't things be like they were before? Why has everything changed?

GÉZA: I don't have all the answers.....I....

YOUNG HUGO: I really wanted to pass the exam and the interview. I really wanted to do my best.

GÉZA: You worked hard and it all paid off and you showed them exactly what you were made of.

YOUNG HUGO: I know I did well but they don't really me they just want my brain, so why should go there.

GÉZA: I understand.....

BELLA ENTERS

BELLA: (SMILING) It's all arranged. You've to go to the tailors on Monday morning and you'll be measured for your new suit for the Gymnasium. We'll get you some new shirts, winter boots, whatever you need.....

GÉZA: Bella. (HE SHAKES HIS HEAD)

BELLA: Geza?

GÉZA: I think you would agree that choosing a school is not something to do without careful consideration.

BELLA: Well of course. The Gymnasium has had a wonderful reputation for years. So many boys and girls from the community have done well there.

GÉZA: And yet now they are only admitting three Jewish students per year.

BELLA: Who would have thought it of the Gymnasium?

GÉZA: My point exactly.

YOUNG HUGO: Mother, I know how lucky I am to have been accepted for a place, it's just that....

**GEZA AND BELLA EXCHANGE A KNOWING LOOK
- THIS ISN'T THAT UNEXPECTED.**

BELLA: Mm. (BEAT) Geza, I need to start preparing for Shabbat, why don't you boys gets some fruit from the garden.

GÉZA: Come Hugo, a bit of fresh air might do us both the world of good.

**GÉZA AND HUGO EXIT AND WALK INTO THE
AUDIENCE AREA DEEP IN CONVERSATION.**

BELLA: (NARR) And with that they were gone for one of their short walks around the garden, which as usual turned into a rather long walk!

**BELLA STARTS PREPARING FOR SHABBAT - SETTING
TWO CANDLESTICKS, WINE, AND CHOLLA ON THE
TABLE. SHE CONTINUES NARRATING AS SHE DOES
THIS.**

BELLA: When I heard that Hugo had been accepted for the Gymnasium I should have been proud and happy. He had worked hard and their entrance exam is never easy. Geza and I had talked late into the night about the school's new admission's policy. Is it right to send your child to an institution that now restricts the number of Jewish students? Like any parents we wanted the best for Hugo? But how can they be the best if their so prejudice?

I kept looking out the window watching them deep in conversation. Every time I thought they were heading back they'd turn around and have another wander. Eventually Geza came striding back to the house with Hugo following in his footsteps.

GÉZA AND HUGO RETURN

- GÉZA:** Bella, Hugo has made a wise decision.
- YOUNG HUGO:** I've talked it all through with father.
- BELLA:** Oh?
- GÉZA:** Hugo has decided, and I have to agree with him, that the school, on balance, and on the evidence of their new turn of policy, is no longer up to his standard. We will therefore have to decline their invitation.
- YOUNG HUGO:** I'm so sorry.
- BELLA:** (SHE HUGS HIM AND TRIES TO HOLD BACK HER TEARS) No, no, no. You are the bravest boy in the whole country. Come Hugo it's nearly Shabbat, let's forget about schools and get the house ready.
- GÉZA:** I have a few phone calls to make....
- BELLA:** But Géza it's nearly Shabbat.....
- GÉZA:** It shouldn't take long.....
- BELLA:** (NARRATION) So Géza began phoning everywhere he could think of to find another school for Hugo.
- GÉZA:** (ON PHONE) Hello? Is that the Munkacs Gymnasium?you have no places left for boarders?.....Ungvar Gymnasium, I am looking for a place for a bright boy, he will be a credit to your school.....No boarders? Ah.
- OLDER HUGO:** (NARR) He made phonecall after phonecall. We discussed whether I could commute every day by bus to Munkacs, but sometimes, in the winter, it would be impossible to get through. We also thought about me staying with one of my aunts in Ungvar.
- BELLA:** (NARR) And all the time Shabbat was getting closer....

- OLDER HUGO:** (NARR) Finally Dr. Vag at the Gymnazium in Debrecen offered Hugo a place. All this was achieved with minutes to spare before we welcomed in the Shabbat. But it came at a price.
- GÉZA:** (TO YOUNG HUGO) Debrecen is about four hours away by train. It's a lovely train journey but you're not going to be able to come home for Shabbat
- YOUNG HUGO:** How can I leave you and Gabi and Dénes and who'll help you collect plums from the garden?
- BELLA:** We'll still be here when you come home for the holidays!
- OLDER HUGO:** (NARR) (BEAT) And so at the beginning of the next term in September 1940 I was all set to leave for Debrecen.
- YOUNG HUGO WALKS TO THE CENTRE OF THE STAGE AND STARES OUT TO THE AUDIENCE.
- YOUNG HUGO:** (NARR) The last thing I saw of Berehovo was my little brother Gabi, waving his wet handkerchief and running alongside the moving train. My mother also cried as she waved goodbye. I promised I would write at least one letter a week.
- OLDER HUGO:** (NARR) It was not the first time I had been away from home – I had once visited a relative in Vienna. But as we were all putting on our bravest of faces we chose to forget that the last time had been a failure with me feeling homesick as soon as I reached Vienna!
- BELLA:** (NARR) Hugo would not be the only one of our family to leave Berehovo. Soon the war would engulf our world and change our lives forever.

MUSIC IS FADED IN UNDER THE ABOVE SPEECH.
THE CAST ASSEMBLE AT THE FRONT OF THE STAGE
AND TAKE A BOW. AND THEN WALK OFF.

THE END.