

to montreal

by Georges Bogardi

photography by Geoffrey James

We arrived in Montreal, my parents and I, on a clear, icy evening in January 1957. Our first glimpse of the city on leaving Central Station was of Mary Queen of the World Cathedral, the domed baroque edifice etched firm against the night, its floodlit row of statues gazing across the distance toward the great cross on Mount Royal. This is still my favourite view of the city: as gorgeous as a Fellini composition and one of the few aspects of downtown that has not changed. But on that night thirty-five years ago, none of us was terribly impressed. My parents, harried by the long journey and by the problems they knew were just ahead, were in no condition for aesthetic contemplation. As for me, I was thirteen and blasé. Far from feeling like an exhausted refugee, I had come to think of myself as some kind of professional tourist, an intrepid adventurer with no fixed address and in no great rush to acquire one.

It had been three months since we left the house in Hungary — in the middle of the night, carrying no luggage because that would have given us away — and since then I had been smuggled over the Austrian



Getting here had been a giddy succession of impressions.
Now the arrival smelled of reality.

border in a farmer's cart, ridden all the trams of Vienna and a train through northern Italy to Genoa. From there we sailed to Halifax — with a stop in Tangier where I posed for a photo on camelback — and then rode another train to Montreal, "our new home."

Kind relatives I had never seen before were waiting for us at the station, but their smelly kisses felt to me like the kiss of death. Somewhere during the three months of travel I had been transformed from a docile schoolboy into an avid existentialist. Getting here had been a giddy succession of sights and impressions, an adventure in becoming, but now the actual arrival smelled of reality. It meant having to settle in again; it felt like something final. I didn't want to leave the railway station unless maybe for a quick tour of the city before leaving again — for New York, Peru, Madagascar, anywhere as long as we kept moving. During our time in Vienna I got used to feeling that destinations were there for my choosing. After all, we had spent our days there shopping for countries, going from embassy to embassy. They were all open to us: as refugees from godless Communism we were desirable acquisitions, trophies of the Cold War.

Now the deal was done; we had chosen Montreal, and the spoiled little epicure I had become had to come down to earth, namely to the gloomy, yellow-brick dankness of Central Station. Where was the soaring glass canopy of European stations? Where were the bursts of steam from the locomotives? This was the last snobbish comparison I allowed myself to make. For years afterwards, I dared not criticise anything whatsoever. Instead, I adopted the immigrant's code of desperate, unquestioning enjoyment. We liked everything about our new country, the mystery food-stuffs (flakes of corn!), the situation comedies we didn't understand. We even liked the weather. Or so we told each other and ourselves: not to do so would have been a fatal breach of immigrant etiquette. The tiniest chink in our relentless enthusiasm

would have meant admitting that we might have made the wrong choice, that our new life might yet turn out to be a failure.

On the other hand, thirteen-year-olds are flexible and I was immediately cheered up by the journey still ahead: taking the escalator up to the street and a long ride in my uncle's impossibly swanky Pontiac — "stratospheric control," I think he said. And there was that glorious view of the baroque cathedral. It confirmed the rumour about Montreal being "the most European city in North America," a phrase we had been repeating like a mantra ever since Vienna, though exactly why we were gladdened by reminders of the Old World just after we had risked life and sanity in order to leave Hitler and Stalin's Europe behind forever is a perversity I still can't fathom.

Our new apartment in Outremont, a furnished 4½ triplex, was by itself worth intense pondering. To begin with, which was the room that was only a half? Another puzzle was the outside staircase, a flimsy structure arching from the sidewalk. Why build houses so narrow in a country so spacious, leaving the stairs outside to collect ice and snow so that even a trip to the corner store meant undertaking two terrifying climbs?

Inside, however, our place was a marvel of harmony and convenience. All the rooms led off a central hallway — excitingly, just like a hotel — and each had a clearly designated function. The biggest room was set aside just for "living," a vague notion at first but one I soon grasped really meant watching television. What was most compelling about our apartment was the symphony of surfaces I had never seen before. The kitchen was done up in Formica — gold speckles floating in milky white — and the living-room furniture was mostly Arborite in deep apple greens and tawny yellows, all of it gleaming and invulnerable to scratches or spills. They reflected the light in a way old-fashioned varnished furniture never could. It was all very modern, this cheery world of synthetic



I had been transformed from a docile schoolboy to an avid existentialist.

surfaces designed by advanced chemistry to render life easy and guilt-free. Spills could be made to disappear by a simple spray-and-wipe operation — as television commercials were always demonstrating — and this could be performed in less than a minute, way before my mother had a chance to burst into tears.

It was this lack of tension at home, thanks to plastics and miracle cleaning agents, that must have accounted, I was sure, for the amazing poise of the Canadian kids I observed at Outremont High. The girls floated down the halls with their piles of books balanced in front of their chests, like Mona Lisas in training, their half-smiles aimed at some distant object I could never locate. The boys carried their books under their arms and were a bit more approachable, but they certainly didn't argue or gesticulate like Hungarians. At most, and only when really provoked, they would stop and utter a single word — "putz" — showing a flash of the metal bands they all wore on their teeth. Our teachers favoured brown tweed and kept golf clubs in their cars, even in the middle of winter. They, too, were unfailingly polite, going through their lesson plans at an even drone, never haranguing us about the importance of education, let alone about faithfulness to the Party.

Amicability was constant and everywhere. People lined up at the streetcar stop and at cash registers as a matter of course. Nobody pushed. Store clerks in Hungary seemed to be in the business of intimidating and repulsing consumers, so that as little as possible of their meager merchandise would have to leave the shelves. Here, the "sales help" actually *thanked* you for shopping. We had ended up in a haven of civilisation where the natives never got angry. Granted, Lucy and Desi were cruel to each other, probably pathological, but they were only fiction, and my schoolmates adored them regardless. The *real* people on television — the ones we assumed represented the authorities — were always friendly. They thanked

us for watching, begged us not to touch the dial, offered free recipes, expressed gratitude for being allowed into our living room. On game shows, too, the losers behaved with superhuman grace, assuring us that we did not have to feel bad for them because they had had fun anyway. Back where we came from, they would have rammed their consolation prizes down the host's throat. There is no word for "fair play" in Hungarian.

Impelled by the immigrant's desperate optimism, I wrapped myself in this protective fantasy world of clean shapes, clear colours, transparent good will. Montreal itself seemed easy enough to comprehend, and Mount Royal was always there to orient you by its own massive bulk and by the three powerful structures built on it: the cross, the tower of the Université de Montréal and the domed Oratory. At least one of these emblems could be seen from anywhere I went and would guide me home to Outremont.

Downtown was Babylon. The neon signs were lit even during daytime and by afternoon they cast on the snow a spectrum of hues that was even more bewitching than my beloved Arborite aquas and salmon pinks. Red turned into fuchsia on St. Catherine Street, and white into something electric, platinum, plutonium. People seemed more animated down here, maybe because of the lights. They laughed and jostled, and there were darting glances whose meaning I knew I was too young to know.

Dominion Square was a mixture of Roman baroque (Mary Queen of the World), lumberjack gothic (Windsor Station) and corporate renaissance (the Windsor Hotel). These structures were separated from each other by vast parking lots — themselves sculpture gardens of the fin-crazy fifties — and by tiny buildings, each housing a tavern hiding behind opaque windows and an innocent façade of deliberate plainness. Above all this towered the Sun Life Building, a Greek temple

with elephantiasis. This was my favourite building because it was clearly meant to be a reminder of the grandeur that is the insurance business. For me, it embodied the grandeur of capitalism in general, the bloated columns pointing toward my own rich future.

In Hungary I had read a few books with Canadian themes, but they were about the Arctic or the wilderness or Niagara Falls, not about the cities. When my parents and I came here, it was as if we had come the way Joseph Beuys in *Coyote* arrived in Manhattan: wrapped in thick blankets of fantasies about America, coddled up against what we did not want to see. But our new life here was not a performance; we certainly couldn't fly back to Europe at the end of the show. So that winter I covered the city, looking for the "real" Montreal. What that was — a single image, a single word would have satisfied me — I could not determine. There were Tudor neighbourhoods around Côte-des-Neiges, stone castles in Westmount, California bungalows with double garages in the Town of Mount Royal. I found a Chinatown at the bottom of The Main, a Little Italy at the top and a thrilling assortment of "ethnic" towns in between, but this was still sightseeing. Where was the defining centre of it all?

Of course I knew where it was, knew as soon as I saw it. "Nothing shakes the heart so much," Cynthia Ozick notes in one of her essays on travel, "as meeting — far, far away — what you last met at home." Old Montreal — Notre-Dame church and the tangle of little streets behind it — may not have been exactly like my home town (no shrapnel marks in the walls here) but the resemblance was terrifyingly close. It was no use pretending that these buildings were just sculpture, façades draped with emblems. These walls had been marked by time and weather, their jumbled texture — grey stone patched here and there with brick, additional storeys built in wood on top of the original stone — spoke of dogged effort, dashed hopes, haphazard



Where was the defining centre of it all?





Only the walls were still alive.

fates. These crooked streets had resisted the plans of developers, they meandered along the paths of ancient river beds or carriage roads carved out by the whim of geology. A few of the old mansions were now dusty warehouses, but most seemed empty. Only their walls were still alive, leaning and bulging under the pull of some essential gravity. These buildings possessed a past and a heart; they certainly possessed mine. And if their walls could still move me as much as they did, then I had not yet escaped Hungary at all.

In the other parts of Montreal there were no such perilous reminders of "home." Instead, we were buoyed up by the utter clarity of the straight, wide streets, many of them so long that they spanned the city from one end of the island to the other. The vast distance was amazing: there was room to move here, to move up. We were exhilarated by the spaciousness, even dizzied by it, like divers surfacing at long last from murky depths into the light. There was no way to get lost here, no crooked streets that led you back to where you'd started. Laid out in a grid, the streets of Montreal seemed designed for the life we craved: neat, precisely planned, with open vistas that hid no surprises.

The North American pop culture of the time was just beginning to fret about conformity — about the "man in the grey flannel suit" — but conformity suited us just fine. Every three blocks you could find a corner store, every six blocks a diner, every dozen blocks a supermarket, and they were all reassuringly identical: all neat and tidy, stocked with the same brands. You could make a shopping list in advance and stick to it. Uniformity was a haven from the turbulence of human events. Each time we opened a box of cookies we felt blessed, not by the taste but by the machine-tooled sameness of these modern products and by their lavish packaging. The cookies were in an airtight bag, enclosed in a sealed box, which was in turn tightly sealed in plastic: triple security. Years later, I recognised

my exaltation in Andy Warhol's paintings of consumer goods. Rendered in primary colours and flat repetitions, Warhol's images stood for our own unashamed materialism, our longing for a monotonous, peaceful world free of nuances and ambiguities. Son of Ruthenian immigrants, Warhol seems to have captured better than any other artist the ineffable longing for clarity that many of us felt, having left our old lives behind.

Before Warhol, there was *Life*. Like some character in a Russian novel who escapes hidden sorrow by embarking on a life of sensual frivolity, I immersed myself in the magazine's glossy advertisements. The slogans alone were a potent mixture of lullaby and hymn to progress: "Relax... unwrinkle", "You'll find new beauty in Melmac", "Better things for better living...through chemistry", "Waiting time — one minute." All the abundance of our new life was here, communicated through the futuristic hyper-English of registered miracle breakthroughs: Dacron, Orlon, Poly-Trevira, Virasil, Viracle. Flipping through the pages of *Life*, it was riveting to take in the products one by one as representations, rather than as part of the dizzying wall of plenty at the supermarket. In these illustrations, Jell-O emerged from its mould as a sparkling pleasure dome of translucent splendour, the colours so acid and clear that they seemed to physically bite into the creamy, white page. I had never seen full-colour printing before: the magazines in Hungary then were like blotting paper and their colour range extended, at most, to blurred sepia.

Here it was different. The "K" of the cereal ad spread across a full page, the purest carmine red possible, with edges so hard that the shape not only looked like scissors but cut like them, straight and sure, through the vast field of white. Sometimes the "K" looked like a rooster and I could hear its sound, the hardest, cleanest consonant in the language. It was a cock crowing, announcing a new day: Kanada. ■