

It Happened on the Brooklyn Subway

The following story is condensed from an article by Paul Deutschman in *Great Stories Remembered*. (edited by Joe L. Wheeler, Focus on the Family Publishers, December 1996.)

On the morning of January 10, 1948, Marcel Sternberger boarded the 9:09 as usual, but suddenly decided to visit Laszlo Victor and changed subways. Victor was a Hungarian friend who lived in Brooklyn and was ill. Marcel stayed until mid-afternoon, then boarded a Manhattan-bound subway for his Fifth Avenue office.

The car was crowded, but just as he entered, a man sitting by the door suddenly jumped up to leave, and Marcel slipped into the empty place. The man seated next to him was reading a Hungarian-language newspaper. Marcel said to him in Hungarian, "I hope you don't mind if I glance at your paper." The man seemed surprised to be addressed in his native language, but he answered politely, "You may read it now. I'll have time later on." The stranger's name was Bela Paskin. During W.W. II he had been captured by the Russians and put to work burying dead Germans. After the war he walked hundreds of miles to his home in Debrecen, Hungary.

Marcel knew Debrecen quite well and listened with interest to his story. Bela was saddened to discover strangers in his apartment, none of which had any information about his wife and family. Fearing his family was all dead, he again set out on foot, stealing across border after border until he came to Paris. From there he immigrated to the U. S. in Oct. 1947.

Provisionally, Marcel had recently met a woman also from Debrecen. She had been sent to Auschwitz, and later transferred to a German munitions factory. Her relatives died in the gas chambers and her husband had been captured by the Russians. She was liberated by the Americans and came to the U.S. on the first boatload of displaced persons in 1946. Marcel was so moved by her story that he wrote down her name, address and phone number.

As they neared their station Marcel casually asked Bela if his wife was named Marya? He turned pale and asked: "How did you know?" When they got off the train Marcel took him by the arm and led him to a phone booth and dialed the number. Marcel handed the phone to Bela, urging him to be calm, and advising him that he was about to witness a miracle. Both Bela and Marya were crying hysterically. Marcel took the phone and told Marya that her husband would be there in only a few minutes. He hailed a cab, gave the address, paid the fare, and sent him on his way.

This miraculous reunion was so poignant and unexpected Marya could not recall in clearly. She said: "I remember only that when I left the phone, I walked to the mirror like in a dream to see if maybe my hair had turned gray," she said later. "The next thing I know, a taxi stops in front of the house, and it is my husband who comes toward me. Details I cannot remember; only this I know—that I was happy for the first time in many years . . ." Marya still fears each time her husband leaves that she will never see him again. Bela, however, is confident that Providence brought them together and their happy life together was meant to be.

Skeptical persons will no doubt attribute the events of that memorable afternoon to mere chance. But was it chance that made Marcel Sternberger suddenly decide to visit his sick friend and hence take a subway line that he had never ridden before? Was it chance that caused the man sitting by the door of the car to rush out just as Sternberger came in? Was it chance that caused Bela Paskin to be sitting beside Sternberger, reading a Hungarian newspaper? Was it chance—or did God ride the Brooklyn subway that afternoon'?