

**THE EXPO AFFAIR**

**A COLD WAR ESCAPE STORY**

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**GEZA TATRALLYAY**



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*I would like to dedicate this book  
to the memory of Major-General George Kitching,  
a remarkable leader and human being.*

# The Flower of Salvation

*I loved you  
when I brought you  
the flower of salvation.*

*You were crying  
and in need.*

*I searched  
sky sea  
earth  
for that one flower  
dared witches  
dragons and bears  
and impossible machines.*

*And I found it.*

*But I did not win  
for when I brought it to you  
you cried  
and it wilted.*

*And now  
those witches  
dragons and bears  
and impossible machines  
have cast a spell on you.*

*You are in a cage  
And only death will free you.*

— SEOUL, JUNE 3, 1970

# Chapter 1

---

**I**T WAS MY brother, Peter, who put me up to it.

We were sitting around the table a couple of days after Christmas, exhausted from the protracted festivities. There were a few slices of walnut and poppy seed roll—*beigli*, the delicious traditional Hungarian Christmas dessert—still left on the family silver platter that had been smuggled out from behind the Iron Curtain the year before by my grandmother, but we had gorged ourselves and had no more room. It had snowed that morning, and it was the holidays, so no one had any urgent reason to get up from the table. We were lingering, and my parents were probing our plans for the summer and beyond.

“There was an announcement stuck on the bulletin board at Western. At Sydenham Hall,” Peter said, as he picked up some poppy seed morsels from the tablecloth with his fingertips and put them in his mouth. “For Expo ’70, in Japan. You know ... the world’s fair. The Ontario Government is looking for staff for its Pavilion. Hosts and hostesses. It seemed interesting, but it would mean taking a year off from school.”

“Peter, you can’t do that,” my father weighed in immediately. “Next year is your last year of university, and you know how important it is that you get your degree.”

“Well ...” Peter hesitated, knowing he would lose the argument against my father. “I guess I meant it more for Geza.”

My ears perked up. This could be it; this could be just the solution to my problems, the way to take a break from university. I was in my second year at Harvard and, while I was enjoying the student life, I was lost. I had no idea what I wanted to be, or even what I wanted to study. I had started as a Biochemistry major the year before, but hated Chemistry. I changed to Government, but found Government 101 boring; besides, it was a huge class, and competition was stiff. I then switched to Geology, because I had heard that in the spring break of second year there was a great field trip to the Bahamas to study coral reefs. Just before coming home for Christmas, though, the professor had cancelled the trip, and I knew I wanted out. ‘Rocks for Jocks’ was not for me, and my life was a mess.

“What did the announcement say, Peter? Do you remember?” I did not want to sound overly excited.

“I don’t know exactly, but I can look. That is, if it’s still there when I get back.”

“Peter, why don’t you?” my mother said. “Who knows, it could be an interesting opportunity. Maybe for Geza as you say. It’s worth looking into, even if nothing comes of it.” She had always dreamed of going to Japan herself, ever since her father—who had been the official doctor of the 1936 Hungarian Olympic team—had hosted his Japanese counterpart in Budapest two years later. She had told us stories about this physician and his wife, who had seemed so exotic, so kind and polite to her, and had brought such exquisite gifts, that she had always wanted to go to their country to learn more about Japan and its people.

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edition of *Maclean's* featuring the future world's fair and flipped through it absent-mindedly, looking at the pictures. I was too nervous to read the article.

A tall, pretty woman finally opened the door and greeted me. "Geza? Am I pronouncing it right?"

"Yes ..."

"My name is Laird Campbell. I will be one of the interviewers today. Please come in."

I followed her into an office, and she introduced me to the other two who would cross-examine me: a short Japanese man, Frank Moritsugu—he had written the letter inviting me to the interview—and another woman in her mid-20s, Jean Foster. The two women had been hostesses at Expo '67 in Montreal, and Frank was a former journalist who had been named Deputy Commissioner for the Pavilion. He was the one now directly responsible for the staff.

The three grilled me for well over an hour—details of my life, what I was studying, why I enjoyed fencing, and so on. The story of my family's escape from Hungary 13 years earlier inevitably came up, and this particularly intrigued Frank who was also of immigrant stock.

"That's quite a tale. Would you say that it has left you—shall we say—anti-Communist?"

I paused to answer, vaguely suspecting that this could be a trap. I decided it might be best to take the high road.

"Clearly, that experience has had an influence on my thinking, on my entire life. But the one and a half years I've spent at Harvard have taught me that wrongs can be caused by all '-isms', all ideologies, not just Communism. Why, look at Viet Nam ..."

"What are your politics then?" Frank interrupted. I had still not escaped the trap.

"They are rooted in man and mankind. I believe that all political acts should be measured against the interests of humanity." I was waffling, but did not know how to extricate myself. "I don't



know ... You might define my politics as a belief in democracy, freedom, peace. In a healthy and sound global society dedicated to the advancement of man.”

The scowl on Frank’s face, as he lit a cigarette, did not bode well for my stint in Japan. Fortunately, he changed the subject.

“You have no Japanese. But I see from your Curriculum Vitae that you’re adept at languages,” he said, looking down at the piece of paper in front of him before continuing. “Besides Hungarian, you speak some French and German. You know that, if we select you, you will have to undergo rigorous training, including intensive study of the Japanese language. Are you up to it?”

“That doesn’t frighten me, sir.” I tried to rescue what was left of the interview. “In fact, I’ve always wanted to learn some Japanese.” It was a lie. “It’s supposed to be distantly related to Hungarian. The relationship of languages is of great interest to me.” This had some truth to it.

“Well, we want to teach our hosts and hostesses enough of the language so that they can have meaningful conversations with the Japanese people. The Japanese pride themselves in speaking a language that supposedly no one can learn. We want to prove to them that a group of intelligent youngsters from Ontario can, in fact, master their language.”

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I had mixed feelings about the interview. Some parts had gone well, others dismally, I thought. For the next few weeks, I put it out of my mind and concentrated on switching out of Geology and trying to decide what to major in next.

Toward the middle of March, I received a thick brown envelope, again with a trillium, the provincial flower of Ontario, featuring prominently in the upper left hand corner. I tore it open excitedly, knowing that if I had been rejected a second time, the letter would

have been sent in just a simple business envelope like the very first one. The news was indeed good, and a brief note signed by Mr. Ramsay himself informed me that my "... application for the position of host in the Ontario Pavilion at Expo '70 has been accepted."

The letter went on to say that many of the details of employment still needed to be worked out, but that I was to report in Toronto in October for intensive Japanese language and other training. It then talked about salary and other arrangements. Meanwhile, there was a lot to read in the appended material, as well as several suggested texts to start familiarizing myself with Japanese culture and society.

None of that mattered now, for I was going to Japan!

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I managed to get my life straightened out back at university, partly thanks to the freedom—academic and otherwise—that existed at Harvard at the very end of the sixties. I found a distinguished mentor—Professor Roger Revelle, Director of both the Harvard Population Center and the Scripps Institute of Oceanography—who agreed to sponsor my major in Special Studies in Human Ecology. (It was only much later that I found out that Roger Revelle had also been instrumental in sparking US Vice President Al Gore's life-long interest in global warming and other environmental causes.)

Thus, I became one of the original 'greenies', and loved the breadth and freedom that the interdisciplinary nature of the program of studies I had finally landed on gave me. This was, of course, partly an offshoot of those Viet Nam years when liberalism was in vogue everywhere and campus life had very few boundaries. As a Canadian, I did not have to worry about being drafted, and was a passive observer to the anguish of some of my peers who clearly struggled with the war. I finished that year quite contented and said goodbye to my friends, urging them to save me a room with them in Adams House for their senior, and my junior, year.

The Indian summer of October arrived, and I was one of 13 young men, 14 young women and 16 six-foot-plus representatives of the Ontario Provincial Police who assembled in a bright meeting room on the ninth floor of the office building on the corner of St. Clair and Yonge Streets in Toronto. General George Kitching, the distinguished former Vice-Chief of Staff for the Canadian armed forces, who had been appointed Commissioner of the Pavilion, greeted us and introduced us to the rigorous training course. We would have to work very hard and formal classes would last for the next 13 weeks—six days a week, eight hours a day—right up until Christmas.

The intensive training and indoctrination began immediately. Each day, the bulk of the program consisted of Japanese—both classroom and laboratory work. Plus lots of homework and exercises to be done outside class. We were divided into four groups, and those of us who showed some affinity for the language were selected for an advanced course—the Hikari, or ‘flash of light’ group, appropriately named for the eponymous express, Japan’s fast train—as well as extra work. On top of it, cultural training, the history of Japan, the make-up of the economy, Japan’s political system, Ontario facts and figures, geography, trade data—we were thoroughly immersed in everything about the host country and the province we were to represent.

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Christmas came and went. Some of us continued working to try to learn as much Japanese as possible before we left. The Ontario government was paying and we would ultimately be the beneficiaries of knowing another language, and a very exotic one at that, so why not?

We were scheduled to leave on February 13th, so my parents organized a farewell party for me two days before, on the anniversary of the fateful interview and my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. That was when I finally realized that I would be leaving family and friends behind for seven or eight months, or perhaps even longer. The evening before our departure, over my favourite dinner of mushroom soup and *palacsinta*—Hungarian crêpes filled with ground walnuts and apricot jam, my father went through the list of ‘dos and don’ts’ of living or travelling in a foreign country.

“Geza, one thing you will need to be very careful about at the world’s fair is contact with workers or visitors from behind the Iron Curtain. Typically, these Communist countries will send spies—*agents provocateurs*—to compromise people like us. Just don’t get involved with any of them.” He paused before adding: “You know, I am speaking from experience.” And he was, I knew very well, given the tales of his interrogation—or rather intimidation—sessions at the hands of the AVO, the dreaded Communist secret police before our escape from Hungary.

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The morning of the 13<sup>th</sup>, dressed proudly in our uniforms—for the men, a gold-buttoned chocolate brown blazer and tie, stone beige trousers and persimmon shirts designed by Paul Firestone of Cy Mann clothes, and for the women, a high-belted chrysanthemum yellow dress trimmed with white at the neck, hem and sleeves designed by the Toronto couturier Zoe Cokkonis—we assembled with our families at Toronto airport.

Once on board, we celebrated the departure with several glasses of champagne and lots of exuberant chatter. The two-hour flight to Chicago passed quickly, as did the wait at O’Hare Airport until we boarded the Royal Hawaiian flight that would take us to

Honolulu. We spent five glorious days in Hawaii, courtesy of the Ontario taxpayer, to rest up from the rigours of training and to get to know each other better outside the classroom setting. We rented open dune buggies and drove around Oahu from beach to beach, tried surfing at Waikiki and gorged ourselves with delicious tropical fruits: pineapple, papaya, mango, coconut and many other delicacies.

Fully rested, on the afternoon of the 18<sup>th</sup>, we boarded Pan American Flight 821 for Tokyo. At last, we were on our way to the Land of the Rising Sun!

## Chapter 2

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**I**T WAS DUSK already as we made landfall in Japan, and fully dark around us when the plane finally neared Tokyo. Judy Kobayashi, one of the hostesses, who had the window seat in front of me, pointed to the glow in the sky ahead emanating from what was then the world's largest city. Approaching it from the blackness of the ocean, this was a truly impressive sight.

We were excited as a hired bus drove us from the airport and through the Imperial capital's streets that glistened as the neon lights reflected and refracted in the pelting rain. After what seemed a very long time, we arrived at the Hotel Daiichi, where we ate our first exotic but delicious meal of sushi and sashimi in the hotel's *sushiya*, and collapsed in bed. The next three days we spent wandering around Tokyo: we shopped on the Ginza, toured the 1960 Olympic site, visited the shrine at Akasuka, meditated in the Zojoji Temple, and ended each day exhausted by the bustling metropolis.

A cultural highlight one afternoon was when several of us decided to take in a Kabuki play. But we did not stay long, as we soon determined that this stylized form of drama with its elaborate,

colourful costumes, dance-like movements and incomprehensible sung Japanese, was an acquired taste—an art form you had to grow up with to appreciate. Nevertheless, we were truly in admiration of the audience, including the Japanese families with their young children who would watch attentively while munching on the pickled vegetables from their *bentoo* or box lunches to sustain them during the day-long performances. Somehow, this was too far removed from *Easy Rider* and popcorn.

On another rainy afternoon, I found my way to the Tokyo Tower and went up to the top, but saw nothing because of the smog. Worse still, I knocked my head against a low bar and felt dizzy, so I had to go back to the hotel by taxi and lie down. Banging my head against doorframes and low-hanging hard objects was one of the very few unpleasant memories I have of my stay in Japan.

And then, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, we embarked on the last leg of our odyssey to Osaka, on the famous Hikari Express. Impressively, the train left on the dot and arrived precisely at the scheduled time at Osaka station. We left the industrial area around Tokyo, and a little while later passed by Mt. Fuji—the legendary Fuji *san*—which looked exactly as on the famous woodcut by Hiroshige. It was only as we approached our destination that Frank Moritsugu stood up in the aisle and informed us that we would be staying at the New Hankyu Hotel for one night since our Higasi Mati apartments were not quite ready.



That same afternoon, we got our first glimpse of the Expo site: the fantastic, make-believe world that brought together people, pavilions and exhibits from 77 countries, four international organizations, one territorial government, six provinces and states, three cities and more than 30 private sector enterprises and associations. With its theme of “Progress and Harmony for Mankind,” it was a

magnificent, eclectic showcase of colourful, futuristic buildings, one next to the other. Toward the middle, a huge open space—the Festival Plaza—had been created to celebrate national days and other festivities. Right next to this covered open space, stretched a body of water resembling a large swimming pool with fountains that would be lit up at night with multi-coloured lights. And the exquisite but austere Japanese Gardens extended over along the side farthest from the Main Entrance—a living work of art and nature where one could escape from the visiting crowds. The pre-opening stillness lent the site an eerie expectancy: all these futuristic dinosaurs were poised to come to life.

We headed straight for our Pavilion on the moving sidewalk—the *ugoku hodoo*—that went around the perimeter of Expo. We had heard so much about the Ontario Pavilion and seen so many pictures of it. Our expectations were very high.

When we finally caught sight of it ... boy, what a disappointment! It was a big, blue, boxy ... ‘Barn’ was the first word that came to mind. And this was where we would have to work for the next six or so months.

The disillusionment continued when we went inside: there were very few tangible exhibits. The plan had been to use predominantly audio-visual techniques and Japanese speaking staff to tell the mostly Japanese visitors about Ontario. And, the main attraction of the Pavilion, the film *Ontario* by Christopher Chapman—who had directed the Oscar-winning *A Place to Stand* for the province’s exhibit at Expo ’67—had not yet arrived, as the officials were trying to schedule a date for the politicians in Toronto to see it and give their final approval.

Since there was not much point in lingering at our very plain Pavilion, Malcolm Mckechnie—one of two hosts who had worked at the world’s fair in Montreal in 1967—and I decided to walk around the site to get a feel for Expo and to look at some of the other, more stunning buildings from the outside. We marvelled at



the cone and terrace composition of the Indian Pavilion next door, and then walked around the aluminum trunk of the magnificent, glass-leafed tree structure of the Swiss Pavilion opposite. Next, we headed for the red and white spiral of the Soviet Pavilion that towered over its neighbours.

“This is about as close to home as it gets for you here,” Mal said when we approached the glass structure of the Czechoslovak Pavilion. “I don’t think Hungary is exhibiting.”

“Yeah, and see, the Czechoslovaks are right next door to the bloody Ruskiies. So the KGB can keep a close watch on them even here.”

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Finally, at ten the next morning, we were bussed to Higasi Mati, to inspect and move into our apartments. Frank Moritsugu told us on the way that this complex, built to house all the foreign staff, was about two and a half kilometres from the Expo site, and the Osaka subway had been specially extended to connect the two. We would have to walk, or else commute one stop, to get to and from work.

The apartment complex consisted of identical, ugly, five-story concrete buildings, with open stairwells and balconies. Jeremy Smith—who was the other host from Expo ’67—shared a ground floor flat with Mal and me in D block, while Cam Deacon, a friend from the University of Toronto Schools, my high school, was in a similar triple right above us. As the youngest of the trio, I got the smallest room, but I was happy because it was the most private: only a sliding paper door separated the other two rooms—which, since they could be opened up into one long space, also did double duty as the party venue. Moreover, my room shared the balcony with the kitchen. We unpacked and spent the rest of the day wandering around the apartment complex, checking out each other’s flats and socializing.

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The next day, after a familiarization meeting at the Pavilion, some of us decided to head over to the Canadian entry. This was a stunning pyramid-like structure with each sloping side separated from the others and coated with glistening mirrors. It was aptly named “The Palace of Mirrors”. We were given a tour, but Cam and I soon got impatient with the arrogant hostess talking in a high-pitched, irritating voice.

“Hey, Boy! This is getting a bit dull, isn’t it?” Cam used the nickname I had somehow acquired in school, and which, ever since then, we used for each other, and still others had come to use for us. “Why don’t we see if we can borrow one of those electrical buggies we saw parked in front of the Pavilion? It might be fun to tool around the site in one. There’s not much traffic out there.”

“Great idea.” I led the way to the three odd looking, open vehicles, still with their keys in the ignition, probably reserved to get VIPs to and from the Pavilion.

“Okay. You drive.” I got in the passenger seat. “Let’s head for the Russian Pavilion. I walked by there with Mal the other day. It’s that great big phallic symbol over there.”

“You have such a one-track mind, Boy. Don’t blame me if those Commie pinko faggots lock you up.” Cam was his irreverent self.

“Watch out! Stop weaving around so much,” I yelled, as he speeded up and gave the steering wheel a spin, testing the limits of the machine.

Another turn, and pointing left, I said: “That’s the Czechoslovak Pavilion, just before the Soviets.” Cam slowed down, as I added: “The more I think about it, Cam, the more surprised I am that the Ruskies allowed them to exhibit here. They really clamped down on Czechoslovakia after Dubcek.” The aftermath of the Prague Spring of 1968 still smarted: it had brought back so many memories of the failed Hungarian Revolution I had lived through.



*The Pavilion of the Soviet Union with the Ontario Pavilion in the foreground*



*Tower of the Sun, Festival Plaza*



*Sasha on the right with two other Czechoslovak hostesses,  
in ceremonial uniform*



*Sasha, flanked by OPP and the author*

# About The Author

Geza Tatrallyay was born in Budapest, Hungary, and escaped with his family in 1956, immigrating to Canada. In Toronto, he attended The University of Toronto Schools, where he was School Captain. He graduated with a BA in Human Ecology from Harvard University in 1972 and, as a Rhodes Scholar, attended Oxford University, where he obtained a BA / MA in Human Sciences in 1974. He completed his studies with a MSc in Economics from London School of Economics and Politics. Geza worked as a host in the Ontario Pavilion at Expo '70 and represented Canada as an épée fencer in the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal. Geza's professional experience has included stints in government (Department of Finance, Canada), international organizations (Inter-American Development Bank), commercial / investment banking (Royal Bank of Canada), private equity (MAVA Capital in Hungary and Syntaxis Capital in Austria) and environmental entrepreneurship (Vertis Environmental Finance). Since 2004, he has been semi-retired, managing a few investments mainly in the clean energy sector and devoting his time to the two great loves in his life, his family and his writing. Geza has dual Canadian and Hungarian nationality, and is married to Marcia, an American; they have two children, Alexandra (born 1983) and Nicholas (born 1985) and a grandson, Sebastian (born 2014).

# Other Books by GEZA TATRALLYAY

*Arctic Meltdown*, an international political / environmental thriller  
e-published on Amazon and [www.smashwords.com](http://www.smashwords.com),  
December, 2011

*Twisted Reasons*, an international crime thriller published by  
Deux Voiliers Publishing ([www.deuxvoilierspublishing.com](http://www.deuxvoilierspublishing.com)),  
November, 2014—the first book in the Twisted trilogy

*Cello's Tears*, a collection of poems, published on May 14, 2015  
by P.R.A. Publishing

*For the Children*, the memoir of the author's escape from  
Communist Hungary and immigration to Canada in 1956,  
published on May 28, 2015 by Editions Dedicaces—the first book  
in the Cold War Escape trilogy of which *The Expo Affair*  
is the second instalment