

Pionír:
An Illustrated Novella Inspired by the Historical Pioneering Heritage
of a Family from Transylvania

by
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For *my* Family.

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Abstract

The creative thesis *Pionír* developed an illustrated novella inspired by accounts told to the author, Gréti Müller, by older generations of her family who lived under the Romanian communist regime and witnessed its overthrow in 1989.¹ The title of the novella, “pionír” /,paɪə'niəɪ/—the Hungarian term for the English word “pioneer”—is meant to capture a central theme in the history of the author’s family, a motif reappearing throughout generations and enacted again in the 21st century in a pioneering move to the United States. *Pionír* was written to acknowledge and honor the individuals on whom the characters of the narrative are shaped. Their story of struggle, pioneering, overcoming, changing, growing, and moving forward can also hopefully bring richness and depth to the stories that comprise the immigrant heritage of the United States.²

1. Manuela Marin, “The Politics of Memory and the Refashioning of Communism for Young People: The Illustrated Guide to Romanian Communism,” *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Studia Territorialia* 21, no. 1 (2021): 78, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363231.2021.10>; Dragoş Petrescu, “One Bloody Regime Change and Three Political Paradoxes. The Romanian Revolution of 1989 and Its Legacy,” *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 42, (2020): 117-40, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.5209/chco.71894>.

2. David McCullough, *The Pioneers: The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020); Honor Sachs, “The Unbearable Greatness of Pioneering Storytelling in David McCullough’s *The Pioneers*,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 41, no. 2 (2021): 209-16, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jer.2013.0041>; J. M. Opal, “Introduction: What Does David McCullough Have That We Don’t?” *Journal of the Early Republic* 41, no. 2 (2021): 171-83, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jer.2021.0026>.

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CHAPTER I. Introduction: The Contextual Development of the Novella *Pionir*

After the Second World War, there came a period in Eastern European history that brought serious social, political, and economic destruction to countries such as Romania.³ In the 1940s, the generation of the author's grandparents became a generation of pioneers, being the first generation to taste the bitterness of communist rule over the land of the Carpathians.⁴ The rise of the new regime redefined everyday life in Transylvania, with families living through inhumane difficulties, but stubbornly holding onto hope and each other. It was this bittersweet time when the author's parents were born. Along with all other young children of that era in Romania, they were called "pionieri" (pioneers) of the nation, being forced members of the Pioneer Organization (Organizația Pionierilor) operated by the Communist Party.⁵ However, in December 1989, the overthrow of the communist regime redefined the title "pioneers," for it was the 1980s/1990s' generation of young adults who laid the groundwork for a new life and new

3. Bianca Dümling, "The Impact of Western Social Workers in Romania: A Fine Line Between Empowerment and Disempowerment," *Social Work and Society International Online Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004): 270-8, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://doaj-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/article/414ad13e7e104f09b7b4ce23d91810cf>; Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln and Matthias Schündeln, "The Long-Term Effects of Communism in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (2020): 172-91, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/stable/26913189>.

4. Florin Lazăr, Elizabeth Lightfoot, Mihai Bogdan Iovu, and Csaba Dégi-László, "Back from the Ashes of Communism: The Rebirth of the Social Work Profession in Romania," *British Journal of Social Work* 51, no. 1 (2021): 340-56, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa098>; Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

5. *Ghidul Pionierului* (Bucharest, RO: Consiliul Național al Organizației Pionierilor, 1985); Veronica Szabó, "Youth and Politics in Communist Romania (1980-1989)" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2012).

country built on the ruins of the former era.⁶ Still later, thirty years after the Romanian Revolution, the author's life took a turn faithful to her family's historic pioneering heritage when she became the first in her family to set foot in The Land of the Free.

The idea of developing the illustrated novella *Pionir* was born out of the author's desire to preserve and share the invaluable life experiences of the older generations of her family and the way this heritage has shaped the author's life. Her strong attachment to her family and their stories adds personal value to the proposed work and inspired the author to bring her project to completion.

In conclusion, *Pionir* is by no means an exhaustive account of the real-life stories that inspired it. Rather, it serves as an invitation for the reader to ask questions while trying to make sense of it in relating the work to their personal life and historical heritage.

6. Flavius-Cristian Marceau, "Romanian Revolution from 1989: Conviction and Execution Ceausescus," *Annals of the Constantin Brancusi University of Targu Jiu, Letters and Social Sciences Series* 2014, no. 1 (2014): 116-19, accessed January 27, 2022, https://www.utgjiu.ro/revista/lit/pdf/2014-01/16_Flavius-Cristian%20Marceau.pdf; Richard Andrew Hall, "Theories of Collective Action and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989," *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 6 (2000): 1069-93, accessed January 27, 2022, https://www.utgjiu.ro/revista/lit/pdf/2014-01/16_Flavius-Cristian%20Marceau.pdf.

CHAPTER II. The Novella *Pionír*

1979

Indigenous war cries shook the woods. From a hill across the little town of Barót,⁷ I watched the boys, five of them, run through the thick underbrush into the open valley, down to a shallow creek. They threw aside their carefully crafted weapons—a wooden bow and arrows set along with a choice tomahawk borrowed from the neighbor’s shed—onto the riverbank and pushed each other into the cool water to wash off the thick layer of dirt and dust. The boys’ ever-loyal ally, a great black beast named Manix, gladly joined his masters in their loud and joyful cleaning rituals.

Weeds tangled into his long fur, Manix smelled like the sweet scent of fresh herbs and mud even long after he went home with the boys, and they hugged him goodbye for the night. One of them, a skinny young boy of eleven, buried his face in the dog’s soft fur and inhaled at length the rich smell. The boy then smiled, and the three of us sat silent for a while on the bottom step of the stairs from under the little corner house.

I loved this boy. Eyes closed, he lifted his sun-kissed face to the evening sky spread above the Land of the Carpathians. I watched the warm mid-September breeze ruffle his short, dark hair. Covered in gold under the setting sun, the boy now turned his face towards me. “Sat-Okh,”⁸ he whispered in wonder, and he smiled for he very much liked the name. It was *his* new name, borrowed from a cherished book, “A Sós Sziklák Völgye.”⁹

7. Town in Transylvania, Romania.

8. Long Feather.

9. Stanisław Supłatowicz, *Ziemia słonych skał*, trans. Mach Edward (Budapest: Móra Ferenc, 1969).

On a general basis, Sat-Okh didn't even like to read and often had great trouble staying awake while flipping through the pages of a book. The stories of Indigenous heroes, however, were different. The vivid descriptions of their lives, of their land, and of their freedom filled the boy with wonder. Every time he read these books, he found himself longing for (something) *more*.

As for now, these books birthed a Székely¹⁰ Native American tribe comprised of Sat-Okh, his two brothers, one of their cousins, and a younger friend living a couple of streets away. The boys chose new names, crafted weapons, built a hidden mud hut in the woods, and fought in wars just like those described in their favorite books. Although most woods around Barót were now guarded, and in some places the trees were already being harvested for lumber, Sat-Okh and his tribe came across a section that seemed to be not yet touched by the communists. This discovery of an untamed “new” land made the boys feel more worthy of their names, borrowed from their heroes, Native American chiefs from times lost long ago, times and places that Romanian boys only heard of from forbidden books smuggled through the Iron Curtain.¹¹

Lately, they'd been faithfully working on what was to become their most glorious achievement yet, a wooden raft. It was a long and tedious task, but the thought of taming not only the dry land but also the waters of Barót led the boys to the unanimous decision

10. Hungarian subgroup living mostly in the Székely Land, an ethno-cultural region in Eastern Transylvania, Romania. The Székelys had a main role in defending the Kingdom of Hungary from the Ottomans in the Middle Ages. After the First World War, according to the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, Transylvania (including the Székely Land) became part of Romania. Although the target of Romanianization efforts during the age of communism, many cities and towns (including Barót) have preserved their Hungarian-Székely legacy even to today.

11. The author's parents grew up in a socio-political context, in which the leading Communist Party tried to limit any interaction of Romanian people with Western idea(l)s (including reading children's books). Although most books, TV shows, and other articles were officially banned, Romanian people still found creative ways to access them.

that the raft was well worth the effort. They chose a big old tractor wheel to support the firm upper structure of laths tied tightly together in hopes of building a raft that floated on water. To the boys' disappointment, however, the creek of Barót proved too shallow for the ceremonial launching of the raft and they had no choice but to wait for the beginning of the rainy season.

The rain came, and after days of ceaseless showers, the creek swelled into untamed waters rising high above the flood plain.

Wilhelm, Sat-Okh's father, often walked by the river on these days. Their little corner house stood by the creek with only a dirt road in-between. A couple years earlier, in the rainy season of 1975, the water flooded the road, entered the front yard and the garden along with the corn field from behind the house. Though the crops were destroyed, the family and the livestock were, thankfully, not harmed.

Unfortunately, this wasn't true of one of their neighbors. Shortly after the rain stopped, the families began to bail out the water and mud from their basements. With all hands on deck, no one noticed that one little boy went missing. Istvánka's parents and all their neighbors looked for him in despair. Eventually, word came that a fisherman found his little body somewhat down the river. The young boy was likely emptying his bucket into the swollen creek when he slipped. All he left behind was a few footprints of tiny, cheap rainboots in the mud by the bank. The neighbors mourned with the family, and even after several years, Wilhelm's eyes sometimes filled with tears when he walked by the swollen creek. Mine did too.

The rainy season of 1979 seemed to come to an end on a late-fall morning. I walked with Wilhelm to the creek, where he was relieved to see that the waters had begun to slowly subside. We then returned to the house, where Sat-Okh and his brothers were waiting for Wilhelm with breakfast. Their father smiled warmly at his sons and held out his hands for the boys to hold while he blessed the food and gave thanks for the subsiding waters. When they finished eating, Wilhelm put on his heavy, gray coat and grabbed his miner's helmet with a cheap, ever-fading light attached to it. He then hugged his sons goodbye on his way to work the day in the coal mines. Before he left, however, Wilhelm explained to them that the water was still high above the flood plain, and he asked his sons not to go close to it for a couple more days. The boys nodded respectfully.

Then, they remembered the raft. By no means did they want to abuse the trust of their father, but the desire to test their wooden structure on water grew surprisingly strong. After a short and heated debate, the brothers came to a compromise. They decided to tie the raft to a willow on the riverbank and then push it into the water without getting too close to the stream.

It took all their strength to move the raft somewhat close to the water. As they were tying a rope around it, Winnetou, a neighbor of theirs and one of the five Székely Native Americans, rode by them on his bicycle. When he saw the struggle of his friends, he jumped off and ran to their help. The raft slowly reached the brim of the bank and with a loud splash it landed on the water.

Indeed, the boys succeeded in building a structure that floated on water. There was however not much time for them to celebrate, as they watched in terror what was

about to happen. The raft was tossed and turned, and the swirling waters soon proved stronger than the rope that was holding the wooden structure. It gave way.

Their work was now traveling downstream at a fast speed. The long hours and hard work of weeks all seemed to be lost. Disappointment, anger, and regret filled the boys as they ran after their raft left only at the mercy of the water.

Then, suddenly, it stopped in a turn with a frightening noise. The creek reached a narrow part, obstructed by stones, broken branches, and debris, where the tractor wheel was likely caught by some of the greater stones. The water, however, was now hitting the raft with full strength. The members of the Székely tribe stopped. None of them moved, as if they all agreed to pay last respects to the raft together and bear with dignity the consequences of their disobedience.

Yet, in this moment of grief, Sat-Okh suddenly turned around and began to run. The others looked at him in shock and dismay. What happened to their brave warrior? Why was he leaving them? Winnetou, who always admired Sat-Okh for his courage, now felt betrayed. Overwhelmed by the loss of the raft, he shouted with rage after Sat-Okh the worst insult he could think of in the heat of the moment: “Coward communist!”

Sat-Okh, however, could not hear Winnetou. All he cared about was reaching their house and the shed-garage. His father’s tractor was their only hope. With its strength, they might be able to pull the raft out of the water with a metal chain, before the water destroyed its structure.

To his great surprise, Sat-Okh ran into Wilhelm when he reached the gate. The coal mines were filled with groundwater and all miners were required to report sick and go home for the day.

“The tractor ...,” Sat-Okh began with a shortness of breath. “We need the tractor.” Wilhelm looked at him confused, but when the young boy pointed toward the empty place of the raft by the eastern wall of the shed, he began to understand what happened.

Wilhelm was a brave, strong man, who was not used to feeling fear. The thought of losing another young life to the water, however, now paralyzed him. His body began to shake, and panic filled his lungs. Sat-Okh first thought that his father was angry with them, but he tried again, in desperation, to ask for his help:

“The others are all by the bank if you want to spank us later, but please help us save our raft first!” Sat-Okh’s words breathed hope into Wilhelm’s lungs when he realized that all his sons were safe. Life came back to his pale face, and he began running toward the tractor while instructing Sat-Okh to grab a chain with a hook attached to it.

When the two of them arrived at the part of the bank where the rest of the boys were standing, the Székely Native Americans first gaped at them in disbelief and then broke out in exultancy. The metal hook landed on the wooden raft.

In that moment, as if the excitement wasn’t enough already, something unexpected happened. First, the boys spotted two tiny creatures drifting with the flow. In the turn, the water hit them against the raft, and they cried out in pain. Two girls. The hands of the older one were clutched around the wet coat of the younger one, her knuckles white and her face distorted by fear and exhaustion. There was no time to lose. With a confident move and miraculous strength, Wilhelm grabbed the metal chain and pulled the raft ashore with the two girls on it. “A life for a life,” he whispered.

He grabbed the younger one and held her in his arms as she soon began to cough and gasp after air. At this, the older sister gave a relieved smile, but her body began to shake, her lips turned purple, and exhausted, she collapsed on the bank. Sat-Okh, who happened to be standing next to her, tried to help her up, but her little body was too tired, and she could not stand by herself. She leaned on him as he walked her to the tractor.

Wilhelm took the girls to the corner house and covered them with warm blankets, while his sons started a fire in the masonry heater. After regaining some of their strength, the girls gathered around the fire with the boys to warm up. Sat-Okh glanced over at the older girl holding her younger sister on her lap while sweetly whispering in her ears. She looked up, and for a moment her eyes met his.

“Very polite of you all to let the young ladies ride your raft first.” Wilhelm broke the silence as he poured hot mint tea into cups. “What are your names?”

“My name is Amika.” The older one answered, and she began telling the story of how she and her younger sister sneaked out for a walk after the rain stopped. The two of them were throwing rocks into the creek when the little one got too close to the water and fell into it. In desperation, Amika jumped after her to pull her out. She could not remember what happened next.

That night, Sat-Okh lay wide awake on his bed recalling the terrifying and victorious moments of the day. Suddenly, he found himself thinking of Amika’s deep, dark eyes, but he was soon distracted by the sound of small rocks landing on the window from above his bed. Without much noise, Sat-Okh climbed out of his bed and opened the window. In the faint light of a streetlamp, he saw Winnetou looking back at him.

“I need to talk to you,” he whispered. Sat-Okh climbed out the window then down the fence until he landed in front of his young friend.

“What are you doing here this late?” asked Sat-Okh, but before he could continue, Winnetou interrupted him.

“I have to admit something.” He took a deep breath. “Earlier today, when you left running, I thought you were betraying us, and I ... I called you a coward.” Sat-Okh, however, only laughed at this and answered Winnetou in a whisper.

“Don’t worry, Winnetou! Compared to Amika, we were all cowards.” Winnetou very much wanted to laugh with Sat-Okh at this, but there was something else very heavy on his heart.

“I... I also called you a communist.” At this, Sat-Okh laughed no more. Not because of the insult. But because he was worried for his friend. He put his hand on Winnetou’s shoulder and looked him in the eye.

“I forgive you. But promise me you will never ever say *that* word again in front of others. Hopefully, no one else heard you this time, but you know very well what happens to those who offend *them*.” Winnetou nodded in relief and hugged Sat-Okh.

“I promise.” Said Winnetou. Then, he remembered what the word “communist” actually meant, and he added with a frown, “I don’t want to kneel again in the morning!”

“Me neither,” replied Sat-Okh.

Swallows

But they both did. The next morning, when Ms. Emerencia walked into the classroom and called roll, she stopped, as usual, at Sat-Okh's name, looked up from behind her thick, foggy glasses, and asked him the same question she did every Monday morning. "Where were you on Sunday, when your fellow *pionieri*¹² honored with their attention the mighty deeds of our *Tovarăș Conducător*?"¹³

Winnetou gave the same answer he did every Monday morning. "In church, ma'am." He knew very well what was to follow and without even looking at his teacher, the boy stood up from his plastic chair, walked to the corner, and kneeled there for the next two hours facing the classroom's wall. Fortunately, he was not the only one punished. Often, he got to kneel beside his best friend, Winnetou. At times, when Ms. Emerencia got too caught up in her lecture to hear the boys whisper in the corner, Sat-Okh and Winnetou could talk about things far more important and exciting than the distorted history of their country, which their teacher was so eagerly trying to explain to the smallest detail.

Month after month, the boys began the week kneeling in the corner for a couple hours. One Monday morning, however, felt different in that Winnetou knelt beside Sat-Okh with an unusual and very heavy silence. To cheer up his friend, Sat-Okh gave a

12. All young children in communist Romania were required to become *pionieri*, members of the *Organizația Pionierilor* (Organization of Pioneers), where they were taught about the core principles of the communist doctrine and about all the achievements of their nation's "glorious hero," Nicolae Ceaușescu.

13. Comrade Leader. The official political title of Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965-1989), the head of the Romanian Communist Party.

mischievous smile, and whispered to Winnetou. “I know one thing. I ain’t bringing Ms. Emerencia no flowers at the end-of-the-year celebration.”¹⁴

Winnetou returned the smile, yet his answer had a bitter taste to it. “How I wish I could be there and see her disappointed face.”

Now both boys grew silent, with a kind of silence that Sat-Okh very much disliked. A couple of days earlier, Winnetou had shared with his best friend a secret far too heavy for him to carry alone. This morning, while kneeling in the corner, the two boys felt almost bent under the secret’s great weight. Winnetou turned his head slightly toward Sat-Okh, just enough for him to be able to look into his eyes without Ms. Emerencia noticing it. “Will you ... will you come Friday afternoon?”

“Yes. I promise I will.”

Sat-Okh waited until his father hugged him goodbye on his way to work the night shift at the coal mines. His mother would not be home from work for several hours. She always had to work longer on Fridays. In fact, she had to work longer every single day.

When Wilhelm disappeared in the closest turn, Winnetou walked to the garage and pushed the little Mobra¹⁵ motorcycle into the front yard. Although he wasn’t permitted to drive by himself, *desperate times call for desperate measures*, he thought, and he put on the old metal helmet. Then, he glanced at Manix, who seemed very eager to follow his master, expressing his desire through loud barking. “Not today, Manix,” he told the beast. “I’ve gotta do this alone.”

14. According to Romanian tradition, at the end of every academic year, teachers were honored by their students with beautiful bouquets of flowers, expressing gratitude for the teacher’s efforts in educating his/her students.

15. Brand of motorcycle manufactured in Romania between 1970-1994.

Winnetou was already waiting for him by the end of the wire fence that ran parallel with the dirt road leading up the hill overlooking the city. Sat-Okh helped Winnetou climb on the Mobra, and carefully reminded him to keep his legs away from the burning tailpipe. I walked behind the boys with heavy steps. It did not take the boys long before they reached the top of the hill. From there, one could see the entirety of Barót.

The boys jumped off the Mobra and for a while they stared into the valley in silence. Sat-Okh reminded himself how thankful he was that contrary to some of their neighbors, his family was not yet offered the great honor to serve the nation and the *Colectiv*¹⁶ by giving up their land and livestock “for the common good” and moving into one of the downtown condominiums. Where would he keep Manix, anyway? Yet, he was well aware that not many rejected the opportunity once it was offered. The families who did were often not seen again for a very long time.

Sat-Okh looked down on Barót with its dirty winding roads, village huts, and stray dogs digging in the garbage. Yet there was a sense of tranquility. In the distance, bleak new concrete condominium buildings reared their ugly heads, replacing centuries-old single-family homes. The communists said this was done for the peoples’ own good, to redefine the economy of the city after the war and make life more modern. Yet Sat-Okh was not sure he liked the communists at all. When he thought of the many trees they cut down, he feared that they would soon sell all the woods around Barót to foreigners. Where would his tribe live then? He was yet to become High Chief, a role now held by

16. Romanian term denoting the Communist Party’s attempt for agricultural collectivization. In the name of this egalitarian initiative, communist leaders took away farmers’ properties and livestock, and declared to use these for the “common good.” Of course, in reality, everything that was taken away was directly enriching the leaders of the country, leaving only greater poverty for the farmers and the rest of the nation.

his older brother. What would happen to them if there was no more land to be discovered, conquered, tamed, and cared for?

However, Sat-Okh was not the kind of boy to complain. He didn't even mind kneeling in the corner for going to church. It was worth it. Kneeling, at least, didn't wear out his shoes. Even on cold late-fall mornings he would choose to walk to school barefoot to keep his only sneakers somewhat new until the time he would grow into them. Even when food was scarce Sat-Okh did not mind. It was only when the son of Ms. Emerencia ate more meat during school lunch than Sat-Okh and his family had eaten over the prior three months, a perk of belonging to the communist party, that Winnetou grew a little more hungry than usual.

Right now, however, there were more important things to care about. Winnetou and he sat silent for a little while, and Sat-Okh began to feel a lump forming in his throat. "Well," he turned to his best friend, "you won't ever have to kneel again" Both boys gave a mischievous smile. "You know, I wanted to give you something that the border patrols cannot take away for themselves," and Sat-Okh nodded toward the town. "Take one last careful look at it."

With its old roads and absurd new buildings, with the residence of the Securitate¹⁷ and the nearby woods, Barót was still their home. And it would, for a long time, remain their home and be for forever the place of their glorious childhood stories that, many years later, Winnetou would tell his children at bedtime.

"It was an honor to kneel next to you," said Winnetou ceremoniously, and both boys broke out in an honest and childish laughter. Then their faces turned more serious,

17. Secret police agency of the Socialist Republic of Romania.

and after a couple minutes the boy added, “I am worried that you will get bored kneeling without me.”

I stood in the sinking sun behind the boys, and we could all feel the weight of the evening sky settling over the rooftops and balconies until it reached the gates of the coal mines.

“Come as soon as you can,” added Winnetou, and Sat-Okh nodded, for he could not speak anymore. The two boys hugged each other. Although it went unsaid, the boys knew this was going to be the last time they saw each other for a long time. But neither of them cried. Brave boys don’t cry.

We were all silent on the ride home.

Winnetou left with the swallows¹⁸ and didn’t plan to return in the spring. For weeks, the neighbors were discussing why his family never returned from their vacation. Some of their closest friends explained it in terms of a possible attempt to escape the country, and they could only hope that the family arrived safely in the West.

Sat-Okh knew they did. Months later in a letter, Winnetou told him about a great flight over the ocean and described to Sat-Okh the land he was now living in, a land of people with a language he did not speak nor understood. They were generous people, ready to help all those in need, but who looked nothing like the Native American heroes from the cover pages of their books. The communists were nowhere to be found, no one

18. Species breeding in Transylvania migrate to warmer places during the winter when their insect prey populations collapse. Every spring, however, these birds are faithful to return to the Land of the Carpathians.

feared the Securitate, there was abundant food, as well as delicious, soft chocolate, and anyone could buy books in the stores.

Winnetou attached a small photograph to his letter, the very first picture taken of him in this new world. He wrote a few lines on the back of the photograph, asking his best friend again to follow him as soon as he could, and promising to prepare him a place by the time he arrived.

Winnetou kept his promise.

Homeward Bound

Years passed before Sat-Okh had a chance to follow his friend. Now almost sixteen, not many people called him Sat-Okh anymore. The older members of his tribe grew up and moved away from Barót—there was no longer a tribe for him to be the High Chief of. He still, however, carried the same unsatisfied longing he did as a little boy, a longing for something more, a longing to answer the call from within.

The Communist Party oppression, the growing misery, the extreme poverty, and the thought of a future that promised little hope only made the call from within Sat-Okh cry louder. Every day, he grew fonder of its voice, until one morning he finally decided to follow it.

I walked behind Sat-Okh as he entered the humble kitchen. He wanted to see his mother, Bethesda, and hear her voice for what he thought might be the last time. Bethesda¹⁹ was silent. This morning, she needed all her strength to stay standing while she was preparing food for her son's journey. When Sat-Okh stepped into the small kitchen filled with the sweet smell of fresh bread, Bethesda stopped and lifted her eyes up at her son.

There was no condemnation in her wise eyes, only deep affection and concern for this fine young man her son had grown into over the years. She loved him dearly, with the selfless, abundant, and deep love she never received from her own mother. Bethesda was left an orphan at a very young age, yet somehow, she came to know how to give her family everything she had and everything she was.

19. In Aramaic, *Bethesda* means “House of Loving Kindness,” (ESV John 5:2).

She smiled at Sat-Okh. In the midst of all her pain, hurt, and uncertainty, life flooded back into her sparkling eyes when she glimpsed her son. Though restless the entire morning, Sat-Okh now stopped, and for a moment he believed that *everything was all right*. He believed that he would escape alive, and that no border patrol would shoot him in his attempt to desert this desolate land groaning under injustice. Yet his body and heart ached at the thought of leaving his dear mother and father behind, at the mercy of the monstrous giant that wore the face of Ceaușescu and grew stronger every day.

Sat-Okh stepped closer and handed Bethesda a pack of letters tied together with burlap. She wiped her floured hands on the edges of her deep-blue apron and took the letters, all written by Winnetou, promising a better life somewhere on the other side of the walls.²⁰ Sat-Okh had treasured them for years, and now it was time to give them away as his legacy.

He wanted to ask his mother the same favor his best friend had asked him in those letters—to follow and to follow quickly! But both Sat-Okh and Bethesda knew she could not. She could not leave. She and her husband belonged to this land, irrevocably. They both saw *her*²¹ for what *she* truly was. Before war and the aftermath left their marks on her body, she was free, abundant, and beautiful. Bethesda's father and brothers fought and died for her lands and her people, her songs were still on the lips of those living under the Carpathian Mountains, and no poison was strong enough to mute

20. Reference to the Iron Curtain.

21. It is not rare for Transylvanian poets and writers to talk about Europe as an Old Lady, faithful until the end to her children, through wars and bloodshed, always ready to receive her prodigals when they return.

them.²² This land was *home*.

Sat-Okh cut a piece of the fresh bread and put it away in the weather-worn suitcase he inherited from his grandfather. Then he wrapped the rest in a cloth, accepting no objection from his mother. Food was scarce, and his parents often went without just so that their children would have something for dinner. Now, it was Sat-Okh's turn. *God will provide*, he thought.

He stepped closer to his mother, kissed her softly on the forehead, and held the tiny woman in his arms for a while, as both were shaking. Then, Sat-Okh put on his old gray hat, and with his suitcase, he stepped out of the family house on a cool summer evening of 1984.

He decided to take one last walk in the backyard. Sat-Okh stopped for a while in the shadow of the great apple tree, where his grandfather often sat before. It had been over a year since he left them.

Rabbits were grazing under the bushes. Sat-Okh held a smaller one in his arms and, with it, walked out unto the dusty road.

Inside, I held Bethesda as she wept bitterly. After comforting her as best I could, I stepped out of the little house and followed after Sat-Okh. After all, I had promised him I would always do so.

22. Murder through poisoning was a common method for the Communist Party to liquidate the “enemies” of the Socialist Republic of Romania. The pastor of the little church the author’s grandparents attended during communism was considered one of these enemies. Members of the Securitate infused poisonous gas through the keyholes of his house’s doors, in an attempt to do away with him. Miraculously, he escaped alive, but the poison had long-term effects on his body. When the author met him for the last time in 2008, he was blind in both eyes, struggled with various health conditions, but never ceased to worship his God through Hungarian songs, some written in Transylvania.

There was one more stop for Sat-Okh to make before he would leave his home behind.

He found Amika hanging wet clothes on a clothesline. The two played hide and seek among the white sheets for a while, then Sat-Okh caught a glimpse of Amika's warm brown eyes. He stared into them as one trying to remember forever the eyes of a dear friend. Amika knew he came to say goodbye and she asked for no explanation. With a bitter-sweet smile, Sat-Okh handed her the little rabbit.

“Take good care of it for me.”

“I will,” answered the young girl. Then she added with trembling voice, “The Lord bless you, Sat-Okh.”

“The Lord bless you, Amika.” He leaned forward, kissed the young girl's forehead, and slowly turned his back on her. Amika didn't move but watched him disappear in the distance, a man dissolving into the sky.

I watched her standing there, holding the little white rabbit in her arms.

Sat-Okh reached a little village on the Romanian-Hungarian border at sunset. He knew he needed time to think about the last moments of his escape, for when he first left, he hadn't even hoped he would make it this far alive. He needed rest.

Sat-Okh decided to knock on the door of a wooden house with its windows still lit and ask for a place to stay for the night. An old man opened the door and welcomed Sat-Okh in a familiar language. He invited him into his house and gave him warm puliszka²³ for dinner before wishing him goodnight.

23. Traditional Transylvanian food.

A Securitate officer and two of his men woke up Sat-Okh shortly after midnight. Sat-Okh never found out whether it was the old man or one of the scared neighbors who reported him to the local police. The *Securitate* agent held a loaded gun to Sat-Okh's temple and ordered him to hold his hands up and to get on his knees. I stepped next to Sat-Okh and kneeled beside him.

It was this kneeling again. *The communists must really like to make others kneel*, thought Sat-Okh as he touched the cool earthen floor of the room. But this kneeling felt different than the ones in the classroom, when he had Winnetou by his side. Sat-Okh didn't mind it back then. Who would have wanted to listen to a lecture about the great history of a country that was so eager to kill its people in order to keep its superficial "peace"? But this was different. Instead of Winnetou's whispers, Sat-Okh could now hear only the sound of his old suitcase hitting the ground after the *Securitate* threw it against the wall.

Native American chiefs don't kneel and Székelys don't kneel either,²⁴ like the pines of the Carpathians that may break in half under a storm but won't bend or kneel. And yet, Sat-Okh, this Székely Native American chief, knelt before the men of communism. But he knelt not for himself. He knelt for his best friend and for his mother and father, for he knew that the news of his death would break their hearts.

The two men of the Securitate kicked and scattered the contents of Sat-Okh's suitcase all around the floor. One of them spat and stepped with his dirty, ugly boots on a photograph of Bethesda. Sat-Okh felt red rage pulsing through his veins, and his calf

24. One of the main characteristics of Székely people in Hungarian-Székely literature is their stubborn faithfulness and loyalty. In the poem "Nyergestető," one of the greatest Székely poets, Kányádi Sándor, compares the Székelys to the pines of the Carpathians, with roots that run so deep in the land that they cannot bend or kneel under the storms; they only break in half and die.

muscles stretched out to stand up from the floor and punch the man at least once. Then, he knew, he would get shot.

Before he could move however, someone from behind knelt mercilessly into his back and pressed his body against the floor. Sat-Okh's eyes got blurry from the pain, and he tasted bitterness in his mouth. A deep hoarse voice from behind gave an order to the other two men to leave the room.

"I've got it from here, *tovarăși*.²⁵ I've got the dog. You can leave now." The two men seemed confused but the voice of their officer was unmistakeable, and they soon left. There remained only the three of us in the room. Sat-Okh was breathing heavily, not exactly afraid, but slowly preparing himself for what was about to follow. He'd heard the stories. He'd heard of people being beaten with chairs 'til they were half dead and then forced to work for the communists for the rest of their lives as a *besúgó*.²⁶ He always thought that he would rather die than become one of the traitors. But the officer now had the photograph of Bethesda.

Sat-Okh began praying that he would remain alive despite the beating that was to follow. If he died, there was no one left to stand between this man and his parents. The man, now holding the photograph of Bethesda in his hands, will look for them and will find them. The communists found everyone. And he will lie to them, he might even tell them that their son is in prison, and who knows what will he ask from them in return for Sat-Okh.

25. Comrades. The official title the representatives of the communism called each other.

26. The term "besúgó" described those who were forced to join the Communist Party in order to keep their families safe and alive. They became secret spies for the officers of the Securitate and were forced to report on all the acts of their neighbors and sometimes even their friends.

“Is this your mother or your sister?” asked the hoarse voice. Sat-Okh could have answered “neither,” but then what would he say, who was the beloved woman from the photograph he carried with himself? He remained silent.

The officer pushed Sat-Okh’s head against the floor, which left a crimson mark. Then he pulled Sat-Okh up from his hair and looked into his eyes. “I am asking you again, who is this woman from the photograph? Is it your mother?”

Sat-Okh nodded. The man let go of his hair and walked around the room until he reached the window. Sat-Okh watched the moonlight reflect off the officer’s loaded gun.

“You know, son ... that mother of yours is a beautiful woman.” Bethesda was a beautiful woman, indeed. On the outside she looked just as lovely as any other young woman, but there was something out of this world she carried on the inside, something precious about her beautiful face that hid in the wrinkles around her eyes when she smiled. Sat-Okh felt a pain unbearable when he thought about her now. He closed his eyes and waited for his death verdict.

“I had a beautiful mother waiting for me, as well,” said the officer with his voice failing while he looked out the window. Long moments of silence followed. Now I was breathing heavily, too.

“Go east. No man is sober there in this hour. *If* you make it home, report to the closest military center for training. I *know* your name.” And the man of the communists, broken as he was, turned toward the door, walked by the body of Sat-Okh lying on the floor, and left the room. “The boy escaped!” he shouted to his men. “Secure the western side and don’t let the wretched dog reach the border!”

I helped Sat-Okh get up from the floor and pushed him toward the window. The photograph of Bethesda was pinned to the window frame. Sat-Okh grabbed it and then broke through the glass with his bare hands and crawled through it. He jumped and I followed. A bewildered *Securitate* member kicked in the door and ran to the window shouting something in Romanian. I covered Sat-Okh with my body as we hid under the windowsill while the officer looked through the fence in the light of his fading flashlight. He cursed out loud and then left the room. Soon the sound of cheap tires could be heard going down the road.

A limping Sat-Okh turned his back to his dream of the West, land of the Native American chiefs, land of his best friend, and the Land of the Free along with all its promises. And he headed back home, east.

By morning the next day, Sat-Okh arrived at the family house he grew up in. He didn't find anyone at home. With no one expecting him, the house was empty. Sat-Okh headed straight to the drawer by his mother's bed where he thought he would find Winnetou's letters. He was right. The little packet was neatly tied together on the bottom of the drawer. Sat-Okh grabbed it, untied the burlap, and opened the first envelope. He looked at the young Winnetou on the photograph, as a sinner would look when asking for forgiveness from a stone.

"I tried," Sat-Okh said. "I tried to come. I tried to come as soon as I could." He looked at the boy in the photograph, his best friend whom he thought he would never see again. Bitter anger burned his face. He was angry with the communists, angry with Ceaușescu, angry with those promising him freedom, ... and angry with me.

Bethesda stepped in the room shocked. She stared at her son, whose face was bruised purple and brown, and whose hands and shirt were stained crimson. Tears started streaming down her face at the sight of her prodigal son—beaten, broken, but back alive.

Neither of them talked. Sat-Okh grabbed the letters, threw them on the fading fireplace ashes, and walked out the door before he could hurl all his disappointment and pain on his mother. He didn't want his mother to hurt, too.

Sat-Okh went where his legs took him, down a familiar path, into the deepest part of the woods where only a shallow hole in the ground marked the remains of a mud hut that once was the shelter of his tribe. These woods had not found “favor” in the eyes of Ceaușescu, he didn't need them yet. The old trees remained untouched, and the earth had the sweet smell of Manix's fur, fresh herbs, and mud.

I walked only a few steps behind Sat-Okh when he stopped. He bowed down, grabbed a fallen branch from the ground, and threw it with a loud and dreadful war cry against the closest tree. He gave another cry, and then his knees hit the ground and he buried his dirty, bruised face in his scarred hands.

The voice within him, calling for a better life, existed no more. He was doomed to kneel and live under the communists. His future was ruthless military training, poverty, and fear with no rights or freedom. Sat-Okh was tired and deeply broken. He collapsed onto a soft bed of moss and fallen leaves and wept bitterly until he fell asleep. I lay there beside him and watched him sleep.

Generations That Were

Sat-Okh awoke to the subtle noise of footsteps approaching. He didn't know if hours or days had passed since he had lain down in the forest. *God help me not to kill them if they come in the name of communism*, thought Sat-Okh, as he clenched his hand into a fist.

As the footsteps got closer, Sat-Okh recognized the limping but firm steps of his father, Wilhelm. The steps belonged to the feet that taught Sat-Okh how to walk the woods. Wilhelm sat down on the soft bed of moss next to his son, with the boldness of an Old Chief preparing to smoke the peace pipe. All sat there in silence.

Then Wilhelm lifted his clear gray eyes to the skies and his voice was a bit failing as he began to talk.

"Two weeks ago, I said goodbye to my son, I buried him, and mourned over him. This son of mine was dead but is now alive. And I won't let him die again.

"*Fiam*,²⁷ you are a lot like your grandfather, Gyuri Tata. We thought him to be dead, too.

"When the troops and tanks were forced to withdraw through our town, they marched across the creek of Barót.²⁸ Hungry, sleep deprived, and dressed in dirty bloodstained uniforms, the soldiers looked nothing like men. They were shown no mercy, and they showed mercy to no one. In their desperate and bitter retreat, the soldiers took everything they could find—food, horses, men, and women. The younger men were all fighting on the southern front, somewhere around the Danube Delta, so it remained to the

27. Hungarian term for "(my) son."

28. Describing a Soviet troop that marched through Barót toward the end of the Second World War, c. 1945.

older, often crippled, men of the town to defend their families and their home. Many were taken captive, only a few returned.

“Gyuri Tata was forced on one of the first trains that took the captives to Siberia. Heaven knows how he found a piece of tree bark to carve a message on. He signed his promise to return with his last name, threw it out the window of the train, and prayed that his message would somehow be brought to his wife. Gyuri Tata wanted his wife and children to know that he was still alive, and even more, he wanted to give them hope for his return ... as if it depended on him whether he survived the Siberian workcamp or not.

“We never knew who found the tree-bark letter, but Gyuri Tata’s message eventually arrived to his wife and children. In his carved letters, my father promised us to return to us. I didn’t believe him. No one did.

“But my father was faithful. Gyuri Tata always kept his promises. You know, like people often did in the older days. One morning I saw my stepmother walking toward our home with a beggar leaning on her arm. Even when they came closer I could not recognize him. He was unrecognizable.

Wilhelm, with tears in his eyes, continued:

“At last I had my father again. He was alive, barely. As my father reached our gate, he collapsed, and I helped my stepmother lift his dark, beaten, and light body into the house and onto the bed. He slept for days, and we prayed that he would wake up again. He did. Although he was hungry, my stepmother only permitted him to eat a little milk-soaked bread for weeks. The months of slave labor and starvation had shrunk the prisoners’ stomachs almost infinitely, to the point that many of survivors perished from overeating during their first days of freedom.

“It took my father many months before he began to taste anything. With his weak voice, he joked with my mother that ‘though her bread was softer than the sole of their shoes they ate in Siberia, he could tell no difference between their tastes.’ We cried, laughed, and thanked God for his life. Shortly after he regained a little of his strength, Gyuri Tata carved a little wooden plaque to remind him and his family of God’s faithfulness. ‘Mindeddig megsegített minket az Úr,’²⁹ said the plaque that was hanging by the entry door, as a Székely sign of atonement.

“The day you left I watched your mother take the sign and hang it above your bed. She prayed there, on her knees, until she fell asleep,” said Wilhelm, finishing his story as he slowly stood up from the ground. “Come home, son, your mother is waiting for you with a warm dinner.”

Although Sat-Okh was hungry, he knelt once again, as the Last Chief kneels at the burial of his tribe and buried his longing and hope for a better life, a dream shattered by the communists. Sat-Okh also buried his call within, the call of the wild.

We stood in silence over the graveyard for a while. Then, we slowly walked *home*.

Yet even graveyards grow flowers. And the most beautiful flower had a name, and her name was *Amika*.

29. “Thus far the LORD has helped us” (NKJV 1 Samuel 7:12).

“You surely found your Land of Promises in *her*,” Winnetou wrote in one of his letters to Sat-Okh. He was right.

Though Sat-Okh thought he buried the hopes of a better life when he failed to escape communism, the voice from within him, crying out for (something) more, was never fully silenced. After long years of mandatory boot camp and military service, he heard the voice calling him again on a cold December evening in 1989. That night, his lungs were echoing the noise of a tramcar knocked over in Temesvár.³⁰

Sat-Okh and his family gathered around an old radio that Bethesda had skillfully hidden for years whenever the Securitate decided to conduct a raid on their home.

Wilhelm helped her connect the little device to forbidden radio waves, and soon the five of them were listening with breaths held back to the latest report on the uprising that happened in the western region of Romania that morning. Though they didn’t hear every detail clearly, everyone soon understood that something great was happening, and that the time might have come for a change in their lives. The boys grabbed their winter coats and rushed on the street, walking at a fast pace toward downtown.

The streets were ablaze. On the snow-covered cobblestone, some were still desperately trying to exercise their false authority; others were celebrating a *Revolution*. The time has finally come for the voice of the oppressed to be heard, singing a requiem for the dead, but this one was out of key, loud, and had no rhythm or rhyme to it. It was

30. The violent Revolution of 1989 against the Communist Party began in the city of Temesvár (RO:Timișoara), when the followers of László Tőkés, a Romanian pastor, could no longer tolerate the leaders’ tyranny. Tőkés’ followers expressed their protest against the death sentence pronounced over their pastor by knocking over a tramcar. This act turned into a violent uprising and spread throughout the country like wildfire.

not pretty. Revenge never is. But the time was now for the youth to fight for freedom and a life that many have given up even dreaming about.

Communist flags were gathered and set ablaze on the streets, while the flames were fed by hundreds of books about Ceaușescu, his doctrines, and his glorious deeds. Agents fired guns, and the people fought back with everything they could grab a hold of.

As fire was falling all around Sat-Okh, in the midst of the chaos he met a pair of deep, dark eyes staring back at him.

Amika had grown into a beautiful young woman over the years. Though Sat-Okh often met her in church, he didn't ever allow himself to stare into her deep eyes again. He gave up his right to do so when he decided to leave her behind on that evening of 1984. He was convinced that he was no longer worthy for her friendship.

But what could have he done differently? Amika was only ten years old when he decided to attempt an escape. If he was to take her with him, who could guarantee that they would make it alive to the other side of the walls? The mercy of the Securitate agent who let him live was unheard of before.

Bullets landing on the ground close to his feet brought Sat-Okh back to the present. He grabbed Amika's arm and pulled her behind a building nearby as the shooting got louder. It was not right for this young and fragile human to be out in the midst of a bloody uprising. Suddenly, Sat-Okh realized that he somehow cared more about the safety of one single woman than the outcome of the revolution altogether. Yes, that night shook the foundations of a nation, but Sat-Okh was overwhelmed by a feeling that even the long-desired freedom would be hollow without the wise eyes of Amika captivating

him for a lifetime. It is amazing how men are willing to fight for their freedom, yet they rarely find fulfillment until they can freely lay their freedom down again.

“What are you doing here?” asked Sat-Okh with a scolding voice. “This is not for you! It is dangerous!”

Amika looked at him in disbelief. “When you left,” she began in a low voice “you told me you did it for your future family and your children. And I believed you. Now, it is my turn. I don’t want my children to grow up and live their lives in fear and oppression. Tonight is the night for me to do something about it!”

Sat-Okh understood. And he also knew very well that he would be trying in vain to hold her back. The Székely Native American chief nodded at Amika. “Together.”

And together they fought for a change, the two of them with an entire nation that could bear the tyranny no more. Within less than 48 hours, the army of the nation decided to ally with the people, and soon the revolution came to fulfillment. It was now the responsibility of Sat-Okh’s generation to rebuild their country on the ruins and ashes of the former era.

Sat-Okh and Amika got married five years after the Revolution.³¹ With her delicate, grace-filled, and tender love, this woman was the only one who could put up for a lifetime with Sat-Okh’s wildfire. In fact, Amika loved the light and warmth bellowing from its flames. She was beautiful, worthy to marry the last Native American chief of the Székely Land. Amika was worth more to Sat-Okh, than the Land of the Free, and he dedicated himself to love and to serve her and their two children forever.

31. December 1989 marked the beginning of a short and violent season in the history of Romania—a revolution that put an end to the 42 years of communist rule in the Land of the Carpathians.

Winnetou shared the same dedication, the devotion of the old Székelys, to love and care for his family with everything he had. His beloved wife, born on the plains of North Dakota, and seven children were now his home. However, Winnetou never forgot the place of his childhood and the adventures he had with Sat-Okh from riding the forbidden Mobra, to hunting bears, to playing revolution where their tribe fought against the communists and was always victorious. His children grew up on these bedtime stories, and in these stories Sat-Okh and Winnetou never had to kneel.

Generations to Come

Bethesda poured honey on the thin crepes and set the table. She called for her grandchildren but received no answer. She stopped to listen, then smiled with delight. *They must be in the attic again*, she thought to herself as she grabbed a plate full of fresh pastries and walked toward the pantry. From there, a wooden ladder led up to the attic, where her two grandchildren simply loved spending the gray and rainy days. There was always a ragged book or a hidden dusty chest for them to find, keeping old memories and telling “stories of long ago.”

That afternoon, Iréne and her brother came across a tiny leather package tied together with a woven thread. As the two children carefully opened it, buried under some painted feathers, there was a bundle of yellow papers within. An old photograph rested on the very bottom, the picture of a young boy on a paper that looked like it had been rescued out of hot ashes. A few lines were written in cursive on the back of the photograph. *Come as soon as you can!*

Bethesda stepped closer to her grandchildren and sat next to them as Iréne handed over the papers to her.

“*Mama, kérlek, meséld el nekem...*”³²

And Bethesda did tell Iréne and her brother about it all while the fresh smell of pastries, honey, and berries filled the room.

“Sat-Okh,” the little boy whispered in wonder, and I smiled warmly at him for he very much reminded me of another young boy uttering the same words not that long ago. And how I loved these boys!

32. Hungarian for “Grandma, please, tell us about....”

On the other end of the world, there was another boy, somewhat older than Iréne, who became a keeper of these stories. The oldest of Winnetou's seven, Edmund heard countless times about the town of Barót and the surrounding woods, the proud and tall mountains with the fir trees that bow to no one. He also heard about communism and admired with the honesty of a child the glorious stories of the Transylvanian people who overcame despite the inhumane difficulties. Edmund soon found that these stories became part of him, and though he never lived in Transylvania, he became a worthy heir of its heritage. The childhood of his father lived in him.

And when he met the family of Sat-Okh for the first time, he felt like he knew them a little although he had never talked with them before. After the Revolution of 1989, Romania slowly opened up its borders to travellers from the West. Winnetou was among the first to come. Sat-Okh was waiting for his best friend at the border. The reunion was glorious. Although Winnetou and his family lived across the pond, every few years they would travel back to Romania and visit Sat-Okh, where the two families spent beautiful times together.

Book of Revelations

It was at one of these occasions that Iréne and Edmund sneaked out for a walk while the other members of their families were enjoying the rich and unique taste of a traditional Székely dinner. It was a hot mid-summer night, but a gentle breeze made Iréne cold in the pleasant way that one can only feel on evenings like that. Edmund offered her his jacket, although he wouldn't have been surprised if Iréne had rejected it. He knew that she was the firstborn of Sat-Okh, often stubborn like her father, and Edmund chose to respect this.

Iréne, however, took the jacket and we walked in a comfortable silence onto the wooden dock on the lake of Barót. An orchestra of a thousand crickets chirping in the meadow from behind us filled the silence of our moments together. Moments that felt like they became shorter and shorter every time although Iréne truly wished to stretch them into eternity. She breathed in the air of the night falling on us in bright orange and pink. She felt home.

She *was* home.

Although she didn't know much about this young man sitting next to her, she knew Edmund carried her story because of the history of their fathers. She found it amusing that he knew more about her than most of her close friends she grew up with. And that spoke to her heart.

But it was time to say goodbye again. The plane leaving early the next day was taking Winnetou's family back across the ocean, Edmund along with them. Instead of an expected goodbye, however, Edmund turned to her with a question.

“Will you come? Will you come as soon as you can?” And before Iréne could have said a word, whether in the spirit of his Chief-father or the tenderness of her mother, Edmund held her tiny hand between his palms, and breathed on them to warm them up.

Thirty years after the fall of communism, Iréne fulfilled her father’s dream when she set foot on the Land of the Free. Edmund invited her to celebrate Christmas with his family that year. She *came*, and there was no Securitate agent to hold her back or force her to kneel.

She did kneel, however, out of free will, to hug Edmund’s little sister, who was waiting with her family at the airport for Iréne, the daughter of the hero from her father’s stories, to arrive. And two days later, Edmund knelt as well when he asked the daughter of his father’s best friend to reunite the stories of Winnetou and Sat-Okh once again, and to live the rest of her life by Edmund’s side.

Iréne and Edmund got married in March, on the first day of spring. As the warm evening settled over the guests still enjoying their food and the merry company, Iréne decided to steal for herself a moment of the night and she soon disappeared behind the trees guarding the neighboring meadow. There, she lifted her eyes to where she believed Bethesda and Wilhelm now belonged. Their silence was tender, and in the light of countless fireflies Iréne’s eyes filled with tears of joy and half-healed grief.

Wilhelm and Bethesda left them only one week apart. Wilhelm went first to make the way, and Bethesda followed him, for she couldn’t for a moment bear being separated from the one who was her beloved husband for over fifty years.

Irène smiled under her tears when she heard a familiar voice calling her name from behind. It was Edmund. Though Bethesda loved all her grandchildren the same, Edmund was one of her favorites.

Edmund held his bride's face between his palms and looked her in the eye. Then both of them turned their faces toward the million little lights of the evening sky.

“*Kedvesem*,³³ we will love like they did. That will be our life,” Edmund whispered. And the two of them became pioneers in a world that is and in a world that is yet to come.

33. Hungarian term of endearment, literary translation meaning “My kind one.”

CHAPTER III. The Art of *Pionír*

In retrospect, the art of *Pionír* found its current expression through much trial and error. Often, these “errors” defined what the art of the novella could *not* accomplish and allowed for further trials to challenge and enrich the author’s understanding of art as a form of communication and expression.

Following the methods suggested by the Honors thesis proposal, the process began with creating preliminary sketches of drawings and paintings that would later become illustrations of the novella’s storyline.

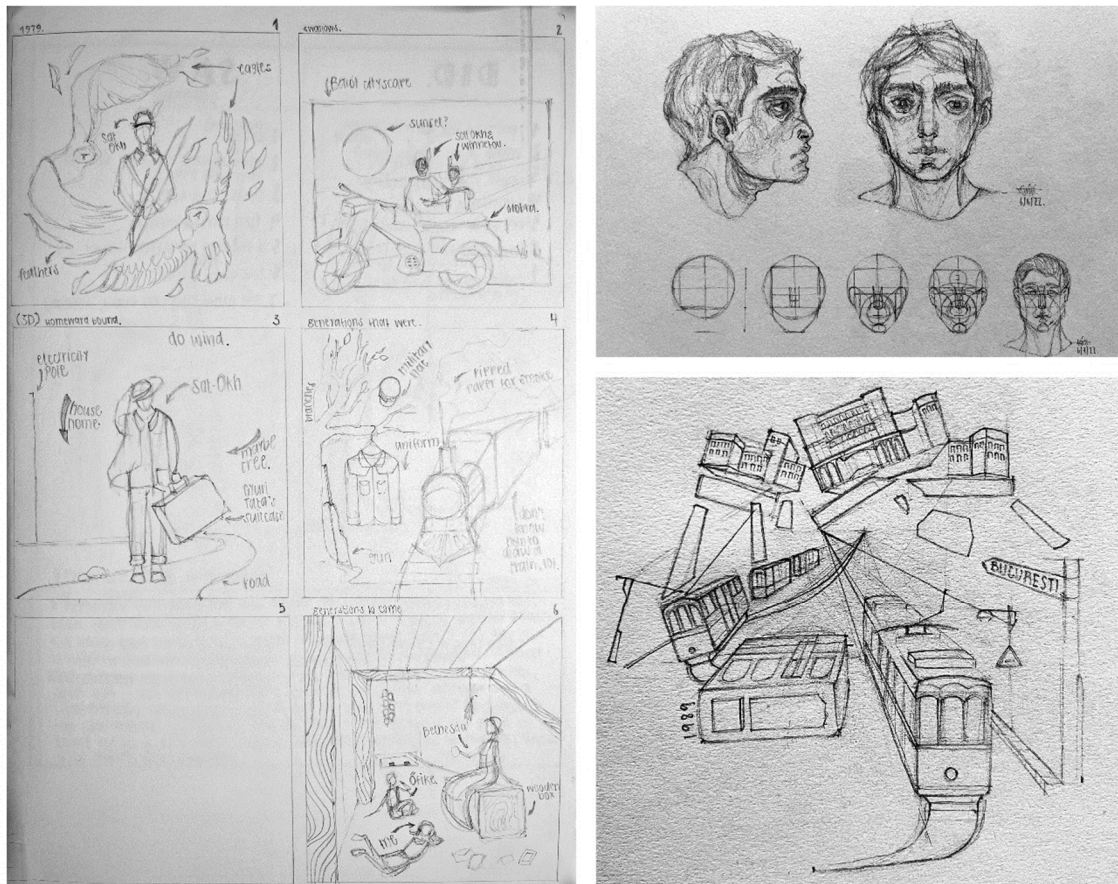


Figure 1: Preliminary Sketches

In a Webinar for Illustration Graduates, Charles Hively, Publisher & Design Director of 3x3, *The Magazine of Contemporary Illustration*, described illustration as a phenomenon resting on the fine line between Visual Arts and Graphic Design.³⁴ The personal attachment of the author to the narrative of *Pionír* tipped the balance in favor of Visual Arts, and her main intent changed from visual communication of objective information³⁵ to sharing some of her personal values and experiences through her work.

Professor Houston Fryer often showed and discussed examples of contemporary art during studio classes. He explained that there were two important crisis moments in the history of Visual Arts that redefined its purpose. One of these moments was the invention of photography in 1839.³⁶ Given this new and effective method to capture reality, artists began to explore through their work what painting and drawing could do that photography could not. In her sketches, Gréti soon found that ways of sharing ideas in the case of the art of *Pionír* were not necessarily limited to observational drawings and representational art (works depicting easily recognizable subject matters).

There was, for example, the “problem of faces.” The characters of Bethesda and Wilhelm from *Pionír* were shaped on the grandparents of the author, both of whom she lost in 2020. In her attempts to depict their faces from memory or reference photos, the author often felt that her grief became louder than that of the everyday life routine, and

34. Charles Hively, “Webinar for Illustration Graduates,” webinar from 3x3, *The Magazine of Contemporary Illustration*, June 9, 2022.

35. Alan Male, *Illustration: A Theoretical & Contextual Perspective* (AVA Academia, 2007), <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat08646a&AN=mtsu.3326fcf5.8b4b.4bf6.b3c4.d477ec9a4b74&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

36. Geoffrey Belknap, “The Print after Photography: Talbot and the Invention of the ‘Photographic’ Print,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 42, no. 2 (2020): 221–42, doi:10.1080/08905495.2020.1733326.

that her sketches could not do justice to the characters. Finally, she reached the conclusion that C. S. Lewis described in his “A Grief Observed.”

I have no photograph of her that’s any good. I cannot even see her face distinctly in my imagination. Yet the odd face of some stranger seen in a crowd this morning may come before me in vivid perfection the moment I close my eyes tonight. No doubt, the explanation is simple enough. We have seen the faces of those we know best so variously, from so many angles, in so many lights, with so many expressions—waking, sleeping, laughing, crying, eating, talking, thinking—that all the impressions crowd into our memory together and cancel out into a mere blur.³⁷

In her next sketches, Gréti began to explore ways that suggest the presence of a (beloved) person without the depiction of their face or full body. One of the contemporary artists Professor Houston Fryer mentioned during studio classes was Doris Salcedo, and he pointed out that in some of her work, Salcedo “used objects, such as chairs, to represent people.”³⁸

37. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 15-6.

38. Houston Fryer



Figure 2: Detail of Doris Salcedo's *Untitled*³⁹

Gréti translated this idea into the art of *Pionír*, by suggesting the presence of Bethesda, for example, through a paper apron decorated with the floral pattern of Gréti's Bible cover. Though this illustration cannot depict the face of Bethesda, it shows parts of her character, such as her hospitality, her desire to nurture, and her faith.

A gradually developing symbolism in the story of *Pionír* led to further decisions and changes in the author's sketches. Faith and the biblical worldview have shaped the life of the author's family throughout generations, and references to this are also found in the novella. For example, Bethesda pours honey on the fresh crepes she will serve to her grandchildren in the beginning of the sixth chapter, "Generations to come." Theologians and biblical scholars, such as Brian Simmons, the author of *The Passion Translation*

39. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 2003, 1,550 wooden chairs, approx. 10.1 × 6.1 × 6.1 m (33 × 20 × 20 ft.), 8th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul.

Bible, agree that honey often symbolizes God's promises throughout the Bible.⁴⁰ In *Pionír*, Bethesda "feeds her grandchildren honey," a symbol of reminding them of the promises that are yet to be fulfilled, such as the reunion of the two friends, Sat-Okh and Winnetou. Enjoying her creative freedom and in an attempt to better capture the richness of symbols from her novella, Gréti decided to experiment with creating pieces of non-objective art.

Furthermore, inspired by an earlier conversation with Professor Houston Fryer, she began to make intentional choices not only about the shapes and colors she used but also about the material and the media with which she worked. For example, Gréti created a small piece depicting a Mobra motorcycle using carbon paper to transfer carbon pigment to the picture plane and added a layer of graphite to it. This way, she obtained a work that does not only depict the motorbike that Sat-Okh and Winnetou rode in the second chapter of *Pionír*, but the carbon pigment and graphite (a crystalline form of the element carbon) reference the coal (a sedimentary rock with high carbon content) mines of Barót that were essential to the economy of the town during the years of communist rule.

40. Isaiah 7:15 (TPT).



Figure 3: Mobra

The author used the same method to create the piece depicting the wedding ring Edmund gave Irène in the last chapter. Both diamond and graphite, though different in their structure, are a form of the element carbon. Using the same technique to create the pieces from the second and the last chapter connects these two drawings, and their different subject matter can represent the Bible verse that inspired the title of the chapter describing the Romanian revolution, “to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes.”⁴¹ While the drawing from the second chapter suggests the “ashes” of Barót with its coal mines and the lack of freedom that separated the two friends, the diamond of the wedding ring from the last chapter is meant to acknowledge the people who helped create a better future for the next generation and made it possible for the two friends and their families to be reunited.

Further experimenting with material became an opportunity for Gréti to better capture pieces of her hometown.

41. Isaiah 61:3 (NIV).

While working on a short paper-cut study representing Sat-Okh, she became aware that touch and other senses can work together with sight to invoke a memory or communicate a feeling through a piece of art.

According to Magill's Medical Guide, synesthesia is "a phenomenon wherein one sensory stimulus—a word or a musical note, for example—automatically induces a second, unstimulated sensory perception, typically a color."⁴² Since our memories are not mere photographs of our past, but rather complex experiences often engaging more than one of our senses, Gréti attempted to translate synesthesia into the art of *Pionír* by her choice of material. She embedded parts of embroidery in her work to emphasize touch and combined a hand drawn picture of Manix with a mint-smelling teabag to enhance the reality of the woods described in the first chapter.

The art of *Pionír* is, therefore, a collection of small works of art. At the expense of the aesthetic experience of a bright oil painting or a unified set of illustrations, these pieces offer the "reader" a set of references, inviting him/her to make sense of *Pionír* while physically experience parts of it.

Although the Honors thesis proposal suggested that the finished project would take the form of an online book, given the nature of *Pionír's* art, a more flexible structure was preferable. Inspired by Professor Kathleen O'Connell, Gréti decided to create an artist's book to hold the contents of *Pionír*. The text block of this book consists of seven envelopes connected to an accordion spine using pamphlet stitches. Each envelope corresponds to a chapter, and contains its illustrations and the text, in a pamphlet format.

42. Judith Weinblatt, "Synesthesia," *Magill's Medical Guide (Online Edition)*, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=86196374&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

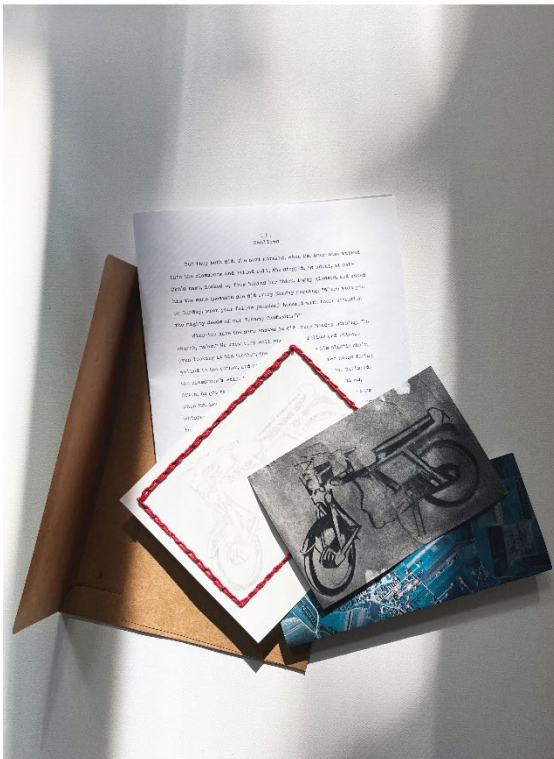


Figure 4: Examples of the Chapters of Pionir

The final form of the art of *Pionír* is, indeed, very different from the proposed set of hand-drawn and painted illustrations. Furthermore, it does not describe the usual characteristics of works created by the author for other occasions. There is little similarity between her other pieces, often of representational art painted in oil and acrylic, and the art of *Pionír* using a variety of materials often disregarding the immediate reality of the subject matter. *Pionír*, however, was not meant to make a case for one being better than the other. Rather, this creative thesis became a way for Gréti to experiment, and find by trial and error what works and what does not work, with her art. Furthermore, it helped her better define where passion lies, in her family and her faith. She hopes to take the experience of *Pionír* and create works of art in the future that reference these values, while also using some of the visual elements she worked on for the illustrations of the novella.

CHAPTER IV. The Future of *Pionír*

As *Pionír* connects Gréti to her family and her homeland, she would like to translate the novella into Hungarian and share it with her family. Moreover, she plans to further explore the historical context of *Pionír* and to continue the research she began while writing the novella.

On November 3, 2022, Gréti will present her work at the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Open House organized by the University Research Center of Middle Tennessee State University. Furthermore, encouraged by Dr. Mary A. Evins, Gréti also plans to participate at the National Conference of Undergraduate Research in 2023.

To conclude, completing this Honors thesis brought *Pionír* to life without limiting it to one single academic discipline and the finished work became an important milestone in the author's professional and personal development.

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