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NEW YORK

OBSESSION

**The Murder
Of an Elusive
Beauty
By Patricia
Morrisroe**

MODEL PIROSKA LANTOS



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"Gyuri had a terrible disease," says a baldish man huddled

over a corner table in the tiny Hungarian café. "It was eating him alive. He was losing weight and his skin was getting paler and paler. But his eyes, they were burning." The man shivers and takes a sip of espresso.

"Gyuri had been talking about suicide for weeks," whispers Ilona Cshulz, sitting at the next table with her husband. "Before Christmas, he said, 'Ilona, I'm going to shoot myself.' What could I do? He was ready to die. For him, maybe it was better. It's too bad. Gyuri was a gentleman."

"A gentleman?" shouts a man in a pin-striped suit. "He was a murderer! He killed Piroška."

"Never!" says Charles Veres, who spent eleven years in a political prison in Hungary. "Gyuri loved Piroška."

"Love," says the first man, shaking his head. "He was crazy with love."

For George Senty, America meant gold jewelry, flashy clothes, and young women.



It is a cold winter afternoon at Café Bartók. On East 80th Street, in the heart of Manhattan's Hungarian district, the restaurant is the size of a fortune-teller's parlor. The room holds eight tables, and the main decorations are the strudels and tarts displayed behind a glass counter. The customers are mostly Hungarian, and, to an outsider, the place feels like a private club.

This day, everybody is talking about George Senty. Until a few days before, the 62-year-old photographer, who was known as Gyuri, had been a regular customer. But on January 3, his body was found in his Tudor City apartment. He was lying on a blood-soaked carpet, with four gunshot wounds several inches from his heart. A few feet away, two Hungarian women were sprawled facedown over a coffee table. They had been shot several times in the chest. They were 37-year-old Agnes Gramiss, who had just come in from Paris, and Piroška Lantos, a 29-year-old model who had been involved in a bizarre romance with Senty.

The murders at Tudor City got the full treatment from the dailies, and much of the information was wrong. Lantos, a "supermodel," was rumored to have had an affair with "visiting beauty" Agnes Gramiss, who had arrived in New York with a "mysterious cache of diamonds." Driven by jealousy, "renowned photographer" George Senty had murdered them in a violent battle over possession of the jewelry.

Actually, Senty wasn't renowned for anything, except perhaps his obsession with Piroška Lantos. He certainly wasn't a successful fashion photographer, and when he died, he had only about \$250 in his checking account. His affair with Lantos had been going on for eight years, in Budapest, Paris, and New York, a house of cards built on fantasies of American-style glamour. When Lantos realized that Senty was not a "renowned photographer" at all but an aging émigré for whom she had become a talisman, she no longer needed him. And he had no choice but to destroy her—and himself. "The minute she got

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Beautiful and remote, Piroska Lantos was the perfect object of obsession.





Piroska's father was a Hungarian military officer.

here, it was a disaster," says Peter Held, an architect who has spent time at Café Bartók.

Piroska Lantos was a perfect object of obsession. She was very beautiful: tall, broad-shouldered, with green eyes and fine features. She had been Hungary's top model for over five years and had appeared on dozens of magazine covers. Withdrawn and secretive, she made few friends, and even they never felt they understood her. "Nobody really knew Piroska," says rock singer Sarolta Zalutay over the phone from Budapest. "She was a complete mystery."

Two years ago, Lantos married Eric Poulet, a Frenchman with severe money problems. Before that, she had lived with Andras Kamaras, a man Poulet called the Mad Hungarian. After the murders, Poulet told police that Kamaras and Lantos had been spying for the Hungarian government. (Kamaras denied the charge.) Since then, Poulet has disappeared.

The case is still open, and although the evidence strongly suggests that Senty murdered Lantos and Gramiss and then turned the gun on himself, police first investigated the crime as a triple homicide. Over two months after the incident, the Medical Examiner's office has yet to classify Senty's death.

Even before the murders, Senty's relationship with Lantos had been a hot topic at Café Bartók. Every afternoon at four,

Senty would drop by for an espresso and relate the latest episode of the "Piroska Affair." It was like a Hungarian soap opera, and even people who didn't know Senty knew about the romance. "He called her his '20000-degree flame,'" says Held. "He wasn't afraid to admit he was madly, insanely in love."

Senty had an expansive, theatrical quality that appealed to the émigrés who spent their afternoons in the café. Although he had moved to New York in 1957, he rarely traveled beyond the boundaries of "Little Hungary," the area around Second Avenue in the East Eighties. To his friends, mostly truckers, housepainters, and cabdrivers, Senty was a famous fashion photographer. The better-heeled Hungarians knew better. "The only place Senty was a big shot was on Second Avenue," says gynecologist Steven Kaali.

Wearing tight designer jeans, silk shirts, and gold medallions, Senty looked a little like Steve Martin playing one of the "wild and crazy" Czech brothers on *Saturday Night*. Senty always had a sunlamp tan, and he dyed his gray hair an unflattering shade of chestnut brown. Every month, he went to a beauty salon for a facial, and the cosmeticians used to joke

that his skin felt like parchment. "I think he had a bad face-lift in Hungary," says one woman. "The skin was stretched so tight over the bone it looked like a death mask."

In keeping with his image, Senty enjoyed the company of young girls. "After the age of 24," he used to tell friends, "women are no good." He preferred girls in their late teens and had a stream of them coming in and out of his photography studio.

For Senty, this was what America was all about—gold jewelry, flashy clothes, and young women. "Even with everything, I think he was a little lost," says Kazmer Kovacs, who owns the Red Tulip restaurant, another popular Hungarian hangout. "There was always a great sadness in his eyes."

He was born Gyuri Sente to a wealthy family in Szolnok, a town about 50 miles east of Budapest.

His father, who was Jewish, owned a large hardware and general store. "Before the Nazis invaded Hungary," says a family friend, "Senty's father took all his gold jewelry and placed it in a safety-deposit box in Geneva. He wanted to leave his children a legacy." When he returned to Hungary, the Nazis shipped him to Auschwitz. Senty's mother, who was Roman Catholic, was sent to another concentration camp, while Senty, who was then 21, was put in a labor camp. An older brother died fighting on the Russian Front. After eight months, Senty escaped from the camp, and his mother was freed by American soldiers at the end of the war. His father, however, was killed in Auschwitz.

After the war, Senty worked as a photojournalist on a newspaper. When the Communists came to power in 1947, he was arrested for anti-Soviet sentiments and served a five-year jail term. Four years later, Senty was one of 200,000 Hungarians who fled after the country's revolt was put down by the Soviet Union. In 1957, he arrived in New York with his wife, Valeria, a Russian ballerina. They were divorced soon afterward, and Senty rarely talked about her. For a while, he lived with Rose Reti, a close family friend who owns a Madison Avenue hair salon. He learned English, and earned money by developing negatives in a photo lab. "His big dream was always to open a fashion-photography studio," says Peter Held.

In 1964, Senty met Clara Aich, a Hungarian-born photographer who had just moved to New York. Aich, who was in her early twenties, needed a job in order to stay in the country. Just as he would later do with Lantos, Senty set himself up as her translator and business manager. He helped Aich find work in a photo lab, and they lived together for a while. "George used the job as a threat," says a friend. "Whenever Clara didn't do what he wanted, he'd say, 'I can have you kicked out of the country like a dog.'"

In 1968, he got \$10,000 from the German government as reparation for his father's death. He used the money to open a photography studio with Aich on East 25th Street.

"Even then he was crazy," says a wealthy Hungarian in his late sixties. "He followed Clara everywhere. She'd go to a restaurant and he'd have his face pressed to the window. She'd go to bed and he'd be standing guard on the sidewalk." In 1978, Aich dissolved the partnership and gave Senty \$25,000.

"After George got the money, I told him to be sensible," says Anton Klein, owner of Anton's Furs. "I said, 'Open up a real business. Stop chasing these young models.' He said, 'What do you expect me to do? Take passport pictures? I am an artist.'"

At first sight: In 1978, Senty met his "20000-degree flame" at a fashion show. "The minute I saw her," he said, "I fell madly in love."

So Senty used part of the \$25,000 to buy a 1978 silver Lincoln Continental, which he shipped to Vienna. He needed the car to enhance his image whenever he traveled to Budapest. Typically, Senty would get a cut-rate airline ticket from a Hungarian travel agency on Second Avenue and fly to Puerto Rico, where he would spend several days getting a tan. Then he would fly to Vienna and pick up the car. "Arriving in Budapest in a Lincoln was like landing in a helicopter," says Kaali. "Everybody thought a major celebrity was in town."

Before each trip, he would buy things that were hard to get in Hungary. He'd go to Alexander's for inexpensive ladies' blouses and to Woolworth's for cheap cosmetics. Then he would visit a friend on 47th Street who sold him stolen gold jewelry. "Senty bribed the Customs agents at the border, who let him in with the stuff," says one man.

In 1978, Senty met his "20000-degree flame" at a fashion show at the Duna Inter-Continental Hotel in Budapest. "The

minute I saw Pirooska," he told friends, "I fell madly in love."

Pirooska Lantos was born on February 7, 1955, in the small town of Szentes, where her father was an officer in the Hungarian army. "Pirooska told me she had an unhappy childhood," says a Hungarian woman who defected to the United States. "Her family moved around a lot, and she never made any friends."

At fourteen, Lantos got a job modeling for a dress factory in the town of Zalaegerszeg. She appeared in fashion shows almost every weekend. After high school, she went to Budapest to attend the city's well-known fashion institute.

On January 18, 1975, Lantos married a young architect named Lajos Kustos. "Pirooska was always complaining that her husband was jealous of her career," says a woman who met her that year at a fashion show aboard a cruise ship. "She told me she wanted to be a top model, but her husband wouldn't let

her out of his sight. A group of us were going to a disco after the cruise, and we asked Pirooska to join us. But her husband was waiting at the port, and he whisked her away."

They were divorced two years later. "One day, they had a huge argument," says a family friend, "and Kustos hit her in the face. 'You'll never hit me again in your life,' she said. 'Nobody mistreats Pirooska Lantos.'"

Next, Lantos fell in love with Andras Kamaras, a handsome graphics designer in his late thirties. "He was more jealous than her husband," the friend says. By 1977, Lantos had become Hungary's top model and traveled on assignment to the Eastern-bloc countries. "She looked so different from all the other mannequins," the friend says. "Most of the Hungarian models had thick, stocky builds and a real peasant look. Pirooska carried herself like an aristocrat." In fact, Lantos was considered so special, Hungarian journalist Tamas Ungvari wrote not long ago in the *New Mirror*, that she was viewed as "Hungary's national treasure."

Still, it wasn't glamorous enough for Lantos. "Being a model in Hungary is very different than in the United States," says a woman who knew Lantos in Budapest. "You are merely an employee of the state. I doubt Pirooska made more than \$200 a month." Lantos knew she had the potential to be a top model, and she wanted to come to New York more than anything in the world.

Though Lantos was extremely ambitious, she had little self-esteem. Some people took her frequent silences as a sign of cunning, but in fact she was extremely shy. Much of the time, she acted like a young girl, blushing whenever anyone paid her a compliment. It was almost as though she didn't believe she was really attractive. Women tended to think she was not particularly bright; one remarked on her "vacant eyes." Most men, however, found this quality appealing because they could read anything they wanted into her face.

Once George Senty had met Lantos, he wooed her with cosmetics, blue jeans, and furs borrowed from a friend in the wholesale business in New York. Senty photographed her in front of the Danube and told her the shots would appear in *Vogue*. Actually, he enlarged the pictures and wallpapered his apartment with them. Of course, Lantos didn't know that. What she did know was that Senty was a "famous" New York fashion photographer who seemed to have plenty of money. He took her to all the top restaurants and nightclubs and always made sure that gypsy violinists were playing at their table. "When the Saints Go Marching In" was their song.

By the fall of 1978, Senty was telling everyone they were engaged. "Pirooska's mother was horrified," says a family friend. "Senty was too old, and she hated all his jewelry. She said, 'He had on so many gold ornaments he looks like a Christmas tree!'"

Andras Kamaras, Lantos's boyfriend, was unhappy as well. He was still living with Lantos, who was now pregnant. Ultimately, she had an abortion, and Senty returned to New York to make the wedding arrangements. "He was ecstatic," says Ilona Cshulz. "He told ev-

As a teenager, she modeled for a dress factory and appeared in fashion shows almost every weekend.



erybody he was marrying the world's most beautiful model."

What happened next is out of focus even to those who knew Senty and Lantos. According to a family friend, Lantos's father was adamantly opposed to his daughter's affair with Senty. He didn't like Senty, and he didn't want Lantos to leave the country; as a military officer, he would be embarrassed by this. "Lantos's father had a close relative in the Ministry of Internal Affairs," the friend explains. "All he had to do was say one word and the marriage was off. Besides, the Hungarian government didn't like Senty coming into the country with all the jewelry. I'm sure they were thrilled to have any excuse to keep him out."

Meanwhile, Senty bought Lantos a wedding gown and arranged to return to Budapest to pick up his future bride. When he went to the Hungarian Consulate in New York, according to Ungvari, he was refused an entry visa. "Senty wanted to know what his crime was," Ungvari wrote, "but he never got an explanation."

"George was destroyed," says a friend. "He tried to pull every diplomatic string to get back into Budapest, but it didn't do any good. The people who were keeping him out were too powerful."

In early 1979, Senty learned that his mother was dying, and he begged the consulate to let him back into Hungary. By the time they agreed, his mother had already died. He returned for two days to attend the funeral and to find Lantos. According to Ungvari, he ran all around Budapest carrying a fur coat in a desperate attempt to get Lantos to come to the United States with him. But she had suddenly disappeared.

"Suicide," says Theresa Sari, sitting at Yellowfingers. "For him, it was the only alternative." A pretty woman with short brown hair and a broad face, she was one of Senty's confidantes. "After he got back from his mother's funeral," Sari says, "George didn't want to live anymore. He told me that one day he sat down in his living-room chair, pulled out a gun, and put it in his mouth. He was just about to pull the trigger when the telephone rang."

Lantos was still in Budapest, living with Kamaras. She wanted to leave Hungary but couldn't get a passport.

"Piroska was like a queen living in exile," says a friend. Lantos and Senty wrote each other, and whenever friends went to Budapest, he asked them to forward packages filled with jewelry and cosmetics.

This went on for nearly three years, but Senty never gave up hope. "Once he got something into his head, he was extremely stubborn," says photographer Jane Corbett, who shared a studio with Senty in 1980.

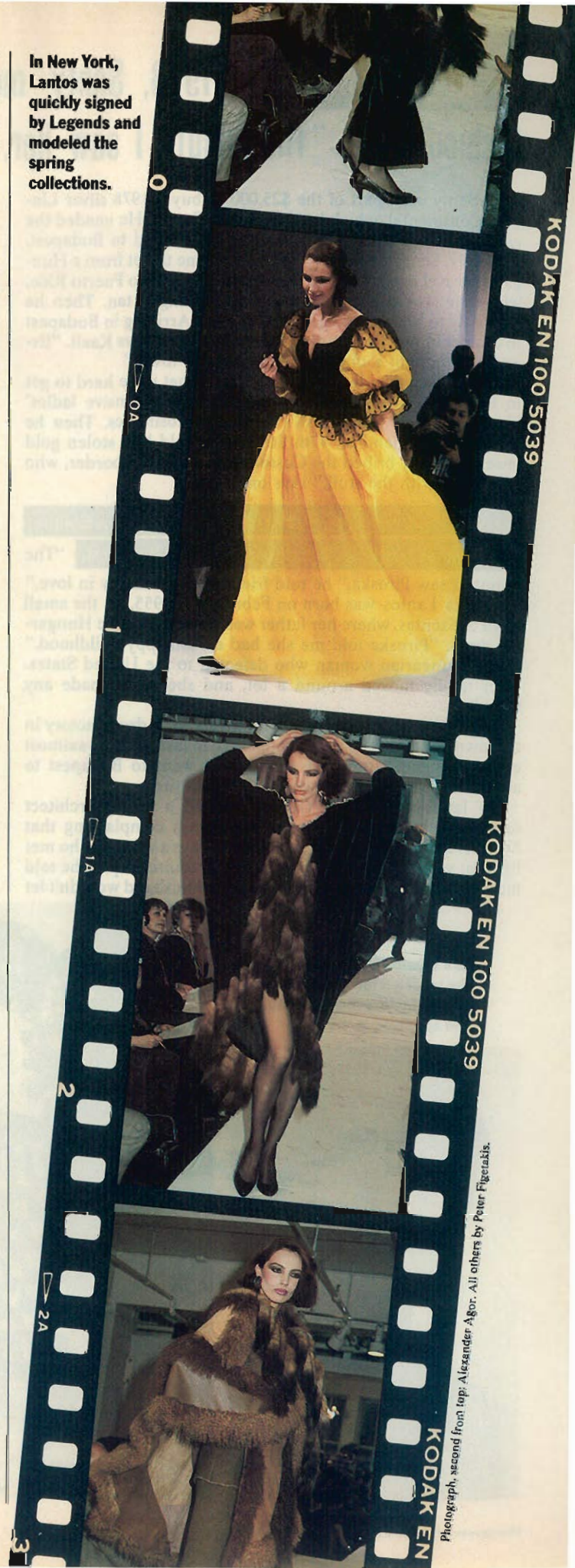
Since the mid-sixties, Senty had been trying to recover the jewelry his father had put in the Geneva bank. Although he didn't have the key to the box, he had the date of deposit. This wasn't good enough for the bank, which refused to open it for him. He filed suit, and the case dragged on for years. "There were only two things he wanted in life," Corbett says. "The safety-deposit box and Piroska."

Lantos last appeared publicly in Hungary in the fall of 1980 at a fashion show in the Inter-Continental Hotel. In the audience was Agnes Gramiss, a woman in her early thirties who worked for Hungary's Atomic Energy Research Commission. Gramiss was stocky, with a plain face and a voice harshened by years of chain-smoking. For years, she had been involved with a journalist 30 years older than she. They bought a co-op apartment together, but he fell in love with his secretary and, according to a source, "kicked Gramiss out on her ass."

Because Gramiss was a fashion groupie, she traveled in the same circles as Lantos, and they had gradually become friends. Soon after the show at the Inter-Continental, Gramiss suddenly left Budapest and moved to Paris.

A woman who later defected to the United States was at the same show and recalls that Lantos was very upset. "I went backstage to see her," she explains, "and she said she had been

In New York, Lantos was quickly signed by Legends and modeled the spring collections.



Photograph, second from top: Alexander Agor. All others by Peter Figeakis.

Endless love: "Piroska was married in Paris, but it didn't bother George," says a friend. "He always knew they'd wind up together."

dropped by *Ez A Diva* [a Hungarian fashion magazine]. 'They told me I don't represent the Hungarian working class,' she said. I hugged her and said that everything would work out. Her eyes filled up with tears. 'Do you really think so?' she asked."

On November 26, 1981, Lantos slipped out of Hungary. "A few days later, she telephoned her mother and said, 'Guess where I am?'" says a Hungarian who later spoke with the mother. "The mother said, 'Where? Budapest?' Piroska said, 'No, I'm in Paris, and I'm never coming back.'"

Since Lantos had told friends for many years that she was being denied a passport that would allow her beyond the borders of the Eastern-bloc countries, it seems odd that the government would suddenly let its "national treasure" move to Paris. Soon afterward, she was joined by Andras Kamaras, who got a job working for a Hungarian company in Paris.

"It's puzzling," says a source familiar with the case. "Kamaras and Lantos were living together in Budapest, so if Lantos had defected, chances are Kamaras's passport would have been revoked. At least that's the usual procedure. But instead, he gets a job working for a Hungarian company. Not only that, he winds up with a service passport that allows him to travel all over the world. The only explanation is that Lantos was allowed to leave Hungary because she made some kind of 'arrangement.'"

Eight months after she got to Paris, Lantos became a French citizen by marrying Eric Poulet, who was in his late thirties. She changed her name to Sarah de Lantos and got a job working as a showroom model. In 1983, she was signed by Glamour, a top modeling agency, and worked for Chanel. Meanwhile, she was having problems with Poulet. According to Tamas Ungvari, Poulet had told Lantos he was a successful real-estate developer. He had a villa on the Côte d'Azur and gave the impression he was a multimillionaire. "Two years later," Ungvari wrote, "he confessed to everything. He didn't know anything about real estate. In fact, he was heavily in debt."

Lantos left Poulet and moved in with Gramiss, who was working as a housekeeper for an elderly aunt. A month later, Lantos was living with Kamaras again. About this time, Poulet began accusing his wife of being a spy. He reported her to French police, according to a source, and they interrogated her for several hours. After Lantos's murder, Poulet told New York detectives that Kamaras had been trying to take her back to Hungary for "political reasons."

By late 1983, Lantos was again desperate. Poulet was showing up at the modeling agency to beg for money. Lantos told modeling agent Jean-François Guille, "I'm afraid for my life."

A few months later, she called Senty in New York. "Come and get me," she said.

"George loved to sit in the bathtub and talk on the telephone," the photographer Jane Corbett is saying, relaxing behind a desk that once belonged to Senty. "He used to keep his gun right in this drawer," she says.

"During the years Piroska was in Paris," Corbett says, "George spent a fortune on phone bills. Of course, Piroska was married by then, but it didn't seem to bother George. Somehow, he always knew they'd wind up together."

Now that Lantos was in Paris, Senty suddenly got a visa to enter Hungary. He spent nine weeks in Budapest in the summer of 1982 and had an affair with a young actress. They returned to New York together, and Senty spent several weeks taking pictures of her. "One day, they got into a huge fight,"

says a friend of Senty's. "She had a close friend from Budapest who came to New York to visit her boyfriend. George didn't like anybody else competing for her time. She got tired of his jealousy and complained to her friend. George overheard the conversation and blew up. 'Why are you doing this to me?' he screamed at the girlfriend. 'I ought to kill you!'"

"Before she went back to Budapest," says another friend, "she begged for the photographs. George told her, 'As long as I live, you'll never see these pictures.'"

Senty told everybody he was upset by the actress's "betrayal." He was also worried about his financial situation. That summer, he had charged \$30,000 on his credit cards and didn't have the money to pay it back. He filed for bankruptcy in November. At the same time, he and Corbett split up their partnership. "I'd had enough of George and his troubles," she says.

Senty got an instant lift when he heard Lantos's voice in early 1984. He hopped aboard the first plane to Paris and brought her back with him. "George was ecstatic," Sari says.



Sarah de Lantos

HEIGHT: 5' 10"
WEIGHT: 35
WAIST: 23 1/2
HIPS: 35 1/2

LEGENDS
International Legends Incorporated
40 East 34th Street New York 10016
(212) 684-4600

DRESS SIZE: 8
SHOES: 9
HAIR: Auburn
EYES: Green

Senty took Lantos's Legends portrait.

"He ran around town telling everybody, 'She's coming! She's coming! The world's most beautiful woman is finally coming to New York!'"

Lantos arrived in New York on March 7, 1984, and moved into the small studio apartment Senty had sublet at 25 Tudor City Place. "It was hardly the glamorous penthouse Piroska expected," says one woman. "She thought Senty was a big-time fashion photographer, and the guy was nothing but a bum."

At this point, Senty didn't even have a photography studio and had sold most of his cameras. But he still had a creative approach to making money. An Eastern European waitress who needed a green card in order to stay in the country allegedly paid him a substantial sum to marry her. She was



On January 3, Senty, Lantos, and Agnes Gramiss were found in the apartment at 25 Tudor City Place.

middle-aged and worked at a restaurant in Queens. Senty didn't tell anybody about the marriage. "When the wife showed up at the funeral," says one man, "people wondered, 'Who the hell is that?'"

Soon after her arrival, Lantos was signed by the Legends modeling agency and modeled the spring collection for Carolina Herrera, Akira, Guy LaRoche, Fabrice, Ungaro, and Revillon. She made \$2,500 a day, and although she worked for only a few months, Legends' owner, Kay Mitchell, says she earned \$50,000 by the end of 1984. At 29, Lantos was a little old to be starting a modeling career in New York, but according to modeling agent Gary White, "her age didn't matter. When I first saw Sarah at the Chanel fashion show in Paris," he says, "I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen."

From the start, Senty became a fixture at Legends. Using the excuse that Lantos couldn't speak English, he followed her everywhere. "He was like an overgrown puppy," says Mitchell. "The minute Sarah moved, George was at her feet." He tried to act as her business manager and became her exclusive photographer, refusing to let anybody else take her portfolio pictures. He also accompanied Lantos to all her assignments, and once waited five hours outside Madison Square Garden while she did a fashion show.

Ilona Cshulz is adjusting her fur hat and drinking a cup of espresso at Café Bartók.

"Gyuri loved to show Piroška off to all his friends," she says. "He was so proud. Every morning he would make her breakfast and then kiss her from head to toe. He told me, 'Ilona, I could make love to her three times a day, but Piroška is always too tired.'"

"Believe me," she whispers. "I know these things. Senty was the best man at my wedding, and we were very close. For example, I'll bet you didn't know he had kidney trouble." Cshulz's husband stifles a yawn and moves to another table.

"Even a casual observer could tell that Piroška didn't love him," says Kazmer Kovacs. "She never looked into his eyes or held his hand."

"I touched her hand once," says the man in the blue pinstriped suit. "We were introduced at the Palm Court, and it was damp and fishy."

In July, Lantos told Gary White she needed to return to Paris for a month to "settle her affairs." Nobody knows what she did there. "Frankly, I find it impossible to believe that Sarah was

even in Paris," says Jean-François Guille at Glamour. "She never contacted anybody at the agency, and I know for a fact she was afraid to be in the same city as her husband."

Lantos stayed with Gramiss, who was living near Poulet. The only other person Lantos is known to have contacted is Kamaras, who by then was married to another model. According to a source, Lantos was riding in a car when she was picked up by French police. Again, she was interrogated and released. Several days later, Kamaras was also picked up and questioned.

Lantos returned from Paris on August 4, and two days later sublet a studio at 399 East 72nd Street. The previous tenant, a young Hungarian woman, had committed suicide in the apartment not long before. Lantos tried to free herself of Senty, but he wouldn't let go.

In mid-August, Lantos told Agnes Gramiss that "today I threw the towel in." She wrote, "Right now I have had a fight with [George]. Imagine that he does not have anything else to do except . . . sit at my place until 12 P.M. watching TV. I have had enough. I will permit him to see me two nights a week. The saddest thing . . . is that he is jealous of my work. My Agnes, people are always a disappointment. This is dreadful. You are my only girlfriend. . . . Everything will have its time."

Senty found the letter and made a copy. "He hated Agnes," says Sari. "But this made him hate her even more. Anytime you mentioned her name, he practically foamed at the mouth."

"The whole situation was a mystery to me," says French model Martine Laurent. "I don't think they were in love. In fact, she seemed disgusted by him. She told me, 'I'm fed up. He's old and ugly. He keeps telling me he loves me and that he'll wait forever. I'd rather die first.'"

In September 1984, Lantos spent several weeks in Milan modeling the fall collections.

"The usual procedure is for the models to go to Paris," says Guille, "but Sarah refused. 'I can't be in the same city as my husband,' she said." For the previous six months, Lantos had been sending money to Poulet, as well as paying the rent on Senty's apartment. At one point, she was withdrawing \$400 in cash from her bank account every two days.

"By the fall, I saw a major improvement in Sarah," says Gary White. "Her English was better, and I told her to be more independent. I said, 'Sarah, you're a big girl. Do you want George

Falling apart: In the autumn of 1984, Lantos told model Deloris Henderson, "George is completely crazy. I think he's going to kill me."

to run your life?" But she just smiled. "Don't worry," she said. "I can always handle George."

Several weeks later, she came in to the Legends agency in a frenzy. "George is completely crazy," she told model Deloris Henderson. "I think he's going to kill me." The conversation took place in mid-October, after Lantos had been invited to an agency party on a yacht. "When George found out about it," Henderson says, "he asked me to spy on Sarah. 'Tell me everyone she talks to,' he said. I told him, 'Forget it, I'm not James Bond.'"

The day after the party, Senty showed up at Legends in a rage. "What are you trying to do?" he screamed at agent James O'Shea. "Sarah's health is too weak for parties. If you keep this up, I'm going to create a scandal." O'Shea says he didn't pay too much attention to him. "We all knew he was a little crazy, but not *that* crazy."

At the beginning of December, Senty called his travel agent to ask the price of two plane tickets to Rio de Janeiro. He said he wanted to leave around the middle of January. By now, he was broke and was borrowing heavily from his friends. He got word that he'd lost the case against the bank in Geneva and that his father's legacy would never be his. Senty was crushed. "The will's inside the safety-deposit box," he moaned. "It's my jewelry. Why doesn't anybody believe me?"

On December 17, Lantos met Agnes Gramiss at JFK Airport. Gramiss, whom Lantos had invited to New York, wanted to sell \$6,000 worth of jewelry that she'd inherited from an uncle in Paris.

Senty referred to Gramiss as "that Nazi bitch." Jealous of her friendship with Lantos, he accused them of being lovers. When he learned they were sleeping in the same bed, he had two queen-size mattresses delivered to Lantos's apartment, even though Gramiss was to return to Paris on January 7. He ordered them to keep the mattresses on opposite sides of the room.

Gramiss likewise despised Senty and repeatedly told Lantos to "dump him." She devised a kind of cat-and-mouse scheme that pitted the two women against him. Anytime Senty came to pick up Lantos for a date, Gramiss made sure they were both

already gone from the apartment. "It drove George crazy," says a friend. "He was already clinging to the last shreds of sanity, and this sent him plunging off the deep end."

Around December 19, Senty went to the Red Tulip and proceeded to get drunk on unicum, a strong-tasting Hungarian liqueur. While gypsy violinists played "The Way We Were"

in the main dining room, Senty sat at the bar with his face buried in his hands. It was 9:30 P.M. He'd had a date with Lantos at six, but she wasn't at her apartment. He wanted to give her a book of poems called *On the Edge of the Deceased*. Inside, he'd written the following message: "Confused, ill and broken is my soul / it has a thousand hurting wounds / with feverish faith, I sometimes feel / that balm came from you . . . / I wait for You, I follow you in thirst."

For the next 90 minutes, Senty constantly ran to the telephone to leave messages on Lantos's answering machine. Finally, he got tired and went home. At 11:30, he tried her number once again.

"Where are you, Piroska?" he asked. "Club A? Or are you whoring somewhere else? You tricked me. You told me to pick you up at six, and you were gone."

"Piroska," he whispered, "you're never going to forget this."

By 12:30, Senty was combing the city for Lantos and left another message on the machine. "I'm at Club A," he said. "You're lucky I didn't find you . . . but I'll find you."

A few minutes later, he called again. "Piroska," he begged. "Please cool this thing down. You know I'm never going to leave you alone. . . . Please stop! You're stretching the string."

On Christmas Eve, Lantos, Senty, and Gramiss went to a party at Rose Reti's apartment. Lantos and Gramiss sat on a couch and held hands while Senty fumed. According to a source, he told Reti, "Look at them. They're flaunting their relationship right in my face. How much can I take?"

For the next several days, Senty spent much of his time in the bathtub talking on the telephone. He called up friends in Budapest and said he was going to kill himself. Others got

Christmas cards with the following greeting: "My life is a horror. There is no way out. Therefore, this is my last holiday greeting. Much love, George."

As Senty plotted his suicide, Gramiss and Lantos were trying to find a buyer for the jewelry. On Sunday, December 30, they invited Dr. Steven Kaali over to the apartment to look at Gramiss's diamond ring. "I wasn't interested," Kaali says. "Besides, I was angry at the way Gramiss was bad-mouthing Senty. She was quite malicious, and I could see she was really firing Piroska up. She kept on telling her, 'Drop the guy.'"

"While I was there, the phone rang," he says. "It was George, and he wanted to know if Piroska was alone. Agnes put her finger to her mouth. 'If he knows we're together,' she said, 'he'll kill us all.'"

On December 31, Gramiss had lunch with a Hungarian friend who works as a stockbroker. She told him, "Senty has finally agreed to end the



Piroska's grandmother and mother go through the mementos of her career.

Endgame: Senty told a friend, "Tonight, I'm going to end the Piroska affair. I'm going to throw acid into her face and then shoot her."

relationship. We're going out tonight for the last time."

Before getting ready for the evening, Senty placed some photographs in an envelope and sent them to the actress in Budapest. "In this last moment," he wrote, "I want you to have these. Remember, I will always love you, George."

At about 6:45, he called Julianna Falus, another Hungarian friend. "I will probably not see you again," he said. "Tonight, I'm going to end the Piroska affair. I'm going to throw acid into her face and then shoot her."

A half-hour later, he stopped by Rose Reti's apartment to wish her a happy New Year and to give her his mother's wedding ring. He wore it on his pinkie and said it was his most valued possession. "I might get mugged," he told Reti. "Keep it for me." Then he picked up Lantos and Gramiss at their apartment and drove them down to a SoHo restaurant. Senty was dressed in a dark-gray pin-striped suit, and both women were wearing black. "They looked so unhappy," a waiter said, "I thought it was a funeral."

They stayed out until 4 A.M., and Senty drove them back to Lantos's place. According to Deputy Inspector Robert McGowan, the doorman saw Senty pick them up Tuesday evening, January 1. They went out to dinner at a restaurant and returned to Senty's apartment. A source familiar with the case says that once inside the apartment Lantos and Gramiss headed for the sofa. Senty opened a bottle of Moët champagne, offered a toast, and then excused himself to go into the bathroom.

Lantos switched on the TV, and Gramiss lit up a Gauloise. She was flipping through a fashion-trade magazine when Senty walked in front of the sofa carrying a .32-caliber revolver. It had been hidden in a hamper in the bathroom. He pointed the gun at Lantos, who was taking a sip of champagne, and fired two shots into her chest. The glass flew into the air, and she collapsed on the coffee table.

Jumping up from the sofa, Gramiss tried to use the magazine as a shield, but Senty fired three shots into her chest. She fell over the coffee table, next to Lantos. Walking over to a kitchen cabinet, Senty pulled out a box of bullets and reloaded the gun. Then he loosened his tie, opened up his shirt, and pressed the gun barrel to his chest. He fired four times, and the last two shots punctured his lungs. Several minutes later, Senty choked to death on his own blood. Only one neighbor reported hearing shots, at eleven minutes past midnight.

Laszlo Stern, a close friend of Senty's, discovered the bodies at 9:50 A.M. on January 3. Senty had given him a key to his apartment and told him, "If I don't answer the phone, come and wake me up." In one corner of the room, the few pieces of photography equipment that hadn't already been sold were set aside with a note to Stern. "For you," it said.

Among the bodies and the bottle of champagne, detectives

found a tape recorder. They pushed the button and immediately heard Senty's voice. "Hello, hello, Radio Budapest. . . This is George L. Senty, known before as Szente. Gyuri. I'm speaking in the name of Piroska Lantos. . ." At this, Senty's voice breaks. "How long can she stand this miserable, shit-filled life with me? For another ten days?"

Next, there is the sound of a woman's voice, and Senty cries, "Don't you touch me." After that, the tape goes dead.

On the evening of January 3, a law-enforcement source says Andras Kamaras burst into a friend's apartment in Paris and demanded a wood statue and several record albums. He said

they belonged to Lantos and he needed them back. Since Lantos's friends in Paris didn't hear about the murder until January 4, it's surprising that Kamaras apparently found out about it so fast. On the fourth, Eric Poulet was on the telephone with New York detectives. "The Mad Hungarian is at it again," he told them.

According to a source close to the case, the investigation has not been closed because Poulet suggested to New York police that Kamaras committed the murders. Kamaras denied this and suggested to police that Poulet committed

them. Poulet denied that. Police are trying to find Poulet and are waiting for an Interpol report determining Kamaras's whereabouts on the morning of January 2.

The source suggests that any information Kamaras or Poulet might provide would amount to a "technicality," and that police are reasonably convinced that Senty committed the murders. The man who had lived an illusion of wealth and success for over twenty years and had pursued a fantasy lover for the last eight ultimately chose to end the story in a brutal and devastatingly realistic way. Rather than suffer further humiliation, Senty put on his best suit, broke out the champagne, and made his final New Year's resolution.

At Café Bartók, everybody is still wondering what exactly

happened. "I don't understand this whole thing," says Elisabeth Szaloki in between studying for her exams at NYU. "Maybe we'll never know."

"I know one thing," says a woman at a corner table. "Leave it to Gyuri not to put the gun in his mouth. He was so vain. And did you notice he was even wearing his good suit?"

"Gyuri was the kind of man you only meet once in a lifetime," Ilona Cshulz says before heading home for the day.

"Thank God!" shouts the man in the blue pin-striped suit. "I had too much of Senty already." He turns to the personal ads in a magazine. "You know," he says, "all I want in life is a beautiful Hungarian woman."

"Like Piroska?" Cshulz asks.

"No," he says, "definitely not like Piroska."



Mrs. Lantos puts flowers on her daughter's grave in Hungary.