

MIMIKOKO
UNDERGROUND by
Katalin Y. Galligan

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"You can't treat a Mimikoko that way."

- Tadeusz to András, 1940

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E p i l o g u e

NOSTRÁDÁMUS AND WELLINGTON

Budapest, March 19, 1944, a calm rainy Sunday morning.

I was awakened by Edith, my governess. She wanted my opinion. Should she wear her light or dark blue sweater? I was very sleepy but I did not mind to be awakened by such an important question. I was flattered that she was asking my advice. I told her: "It depends. If you want to look serious, wear the dark blue. If you want to look your best, put on the light blue." Without any hesitation she wore the light blue. She was going to see her partisan fiancé.

As soon as Edith had left, Papa came to my room. He told me not to go to sleep, because after breakfast we were to go on a little mission. Since he would not reveal the nature of this mission, he seemed very mysterious to me. I was dying to know. We finished breakfast by ten. It was our usual Sunday breakfast. I was scolded because I was eating slowly and very little. András was impertinent and making faces. Mama had the usual tears in her eyes. Papa reminded us: "You have forgotten again to have consideration for Mama!" There was nothing noteworthy about our behavior. It went always like this when the four of us were together at table.

After breakfast I kept following Papa around. I was pestering him nonstop. I wanted to know all about the mysterious mission. Finally he told me that he was going to have coffee at the house of András' literature teacher. We would all go together but only he was to go in. It was a 'mission' because he had to convince the teacher to have special consideration for Andrew. My fourteen year old brother already had had difficulties with some of his teachers. Papa always found a way to straighten things out for him. This time Papa would discuss the possibility of publishing the teacher's anthology.

Papa put on a new coat. He was very proud of it. It was reversible. One side was tweed, the other a blue raincoat. As he was putting it on, he explained the ingenuity of this coat. When followed by the men of Counterintelligence, he could go into a building wearing the tweed side and when he came out he would be wearing the blue raincoat side

and thereby elude the men who were following him. Mama got upset and scolded him for filling my head with such stupid stories. Was it not already bad enough that my imagination was so vivid for my age?

We left around ten thirty. On the way Papa continued teaching us the tricks of the underground. I was listening with great interest, András was quite bored and Mama was rather annoyed. The city was deserted. On the way from Váci Street to Andrásy Avenue we saw only one or two passersby.

The teacher lived behind the Basilica. Papa went into his apartment building. We stayed outside. For a while we walked up and down the street. Then I had an idea: "Let's go into the Basilica and pray." With one voice, Mama and András dismissed this notion. But there was no time for discussion. For the sky was suddenly filled with low flying German airplanes. In a few minutes Papa came rushing out the door wearing the blue raincoat. He too had heard the planes. He said only a few words to the effect that for sure a serious event was in the making. We should return home as fast as possible. We hurried on in silence. We marched together forming a tiny unit. We didn't stop on Vörösmarty Square at Gerbeaud's¹. We did not go into our Book Shop on Váci Street. We just kept going. On the way home we encountered no one. Even the Hungarian Officers' Club seemed deserted. Finally we got home. Mama and Papa wondered if they should make some phone calls. Papa decided against it. He was sure that our telephon was bugged. Betty, our cook, asked Mama when lunch should be served. "Right away," Mama told her. We sat down at the table. Betty had just started to serve the soup when the doorbell rang. The bell had a neurotic urgency to it. Betty opened the door. Ferenc, our writer friend, was standing at the door. He was very pale. He entered. As soon as Betty left the room he said to Papa: "The Germans have occupied Budapest. Imre, you will be among the first to be arrested by the Gestapo. You have to leave immediately with the family. You have no time to lose," Papa told us to go to our room and prepare our backpacks. We could take whatever we wished.

Ferenc followed me. I knew that he wanted to tell me something. So I stopped. "Let me remind you, Little Mimikoko, because I am the confidant and biographer of

¹ Famous Pastry Shop and Cafe

NostrÁdámus, I came to warn you of the danger that is ahead of you. And whatever is going to happen, never give up hope, because I am also the confidant and biographer of Britain's Wellington and I promise you, he will always perform his duty for you..." Leaving me somewhat reassured, he went back to Mama and Papa.

In my room , I went first to my glass cabinet and took a last look at my porcelain animal figurines. I said good-bye to each of them in turn . In my backpack I put two books of poetry, one French, the other Hungarian. I also packed my new pair of shoes. Within ten minutes we had to leave. Mama told Betty that we were going on a brief trip to the Mátra Mountains. She gave her some money and said that she would be told later when to expect us back.

By now Ferenc had already left. He had to warn others too. Papa was in charge of our exodus. Mama and András left separately, by different routes. I went with Papa. He was calm but I was scarred stiff. We all were going to the same place. To Jenő's.

DESTINATION EGER

We spent many Sunday afternoons at Jenő's. Jenő, and his wife Mária, were the best of friends with Papa and Mama. Their elder son, Iván, and my brother, András, had been friends since birth. They had another son, Ádám. He was of my age. Whenever we were with our parents on such a visit, Ádám was supposed to play with me. This was just fine with the 'big boys'. They did not have to be bothered with the Tittle boy'.

When we arrived to Jenő's, Mária opened the door. I never saw her so upset. Immediately I was sent to the children's room. András and Iván were already busy playing 'button soccer'. Ádám was watching them. I had just entered the room when Granny showed up. She was carrying a small suitcase. I was very surprised. I recognized it. It was mine. It was neatly packed with my clothes . After all, the German occupation did not come as a total surprise to the grownups. They had been preparing for it. It is true that in the past month Papa had been telling me that it was possible that by Easter I was to go to

live in a castle or that perhaps I would go to Switzerland to a boarding school. Also a lot of new clothes were being made for me. Seeing my little suitcase I wondered whether I was heading for the castle or the boarding School in Switzerland. Both seemed a very 'big girl' kind of thing to do.

While we were playing in the children's room, the grownups were holding a strategic planning session in the drawing room. After a while I got bored watching the boys. I left them. I sneaked out their room. I was curious, I wanted to know what were the grownups discussing. I have found them in the dinning room. The table was covered with papers. They were making preparation for our underground existence. First we had to acquire a new identity. They have chosen the easiest solution Papa became Jenő, Mama became Mária, András became Iván. This was absolutely perfect. Yes, but how about me? Well, I guessed that I was going to become Ádám. I thought that in order to disguise me as Ádám, they have to cut my hair short and dress me as a boy. I started to think of Shakespearean roles. I liked it. I was excited. I did not even mind of having my hair cut short. My imagination carried me away. I had practically become Ádám Cz.

Mama's and Mária's comments suddenly brought me back to reality. They both agreed that it was ridiculous to be concerned with me. The Gestapo had better things to do than to be bothered with an insignificant little girl. Papa and Jenő persisted that I should also have a new ID. Since they were already well equipped to forge papers they altered Ádám's birth certificate and I have become the non existing little sister of Iván. Now, I had genuine false papers. I was somewhat confused. After all for one moment to another I had become a little girl who never was. Papa assured me that it was much easier to be someone who never existed than to take a real person's identity. I'll have total artistic control...

Now, we had our false papers, but where should we go? Eger seemed the most suitable place to hide. Mamuska and Papuska, Papas parents lived there. It was decided. We should leave immediately for Eger. They called a taxi. In no time we were at Keleti² At the railway station there was not any ID control. In our train the first class was almost

² East Budapest Station

empty. Papa and Mama bought a lot of candy and newspapers. The trip was calm and uneventful. Papa was calm but Mama was very worried.

After a few hours of travel we had arrived in Eger. Mamuska and Papuska were very happy to see us. It was getting late so we ate supper right away. After supper we have retired to the living room. I set down near the stove between Papa and Papuska. Mamuska gave a slightly scolding lecture to Papa. He should have learned his lesson not to get involved in political causes. Anyhow never any good came from it. He should think of his family first... Papa just listened without saying a word. Night was falling! It was time to go to bed. For safety's sake Papa slept in the attic. I slept on the living room sofa. As always I had a wonderful sleep under Mamuska's comforting and reassuring handmade featherbed.

Papuska was an early riser. Early morning, as always, he went for a walk. He hardly left and already he was back. "There is great trouble"- he reported. "There are Germans everywhere." For a moment we did not know what should we do next. Dr. Imre, the family physician was a very intelligent Jew. They decided to turn to him for advice. He told Papa to go back immediately to Budapest. Mama and us, we should go to Szarvaskő, a village at the foot of Mátra mountains. We would not be suspicious at all because of the bombing many women left Budapest with their children. Dr. Imre happened to know a very nice family who rented rooms for tourists. He offered to make all the arrangements for us.

It was heartbreaking to say good-bye. "What will happen to Papa? Is he going arrive safely to Budapest? How will Mama manage to be alone with us?" I asked myself I was tormented by hundreds of questions. I did not dare to ask them because I knew that I was not supposed to.

MANCI, MY MOTHER'S GOAT

Szarvaskő is not very far from Eger. It took us a short time to get there. As we were approaching the village, the landscape was becoming more and more spectacular. The winding roads were taking us through enchanted woods. I studied them carefully. I tried to look through the eyes of Kati Cz., the little girl who never was. Through this process, I was making Mimikoko disappear.

We arrived. Szarvaskő was a quaint little village. Our hosts, the Punyis, were waiting for us on the verandah. I noticed immediately that except for the old father, there were only women in the family. There was a simple explanation. Most of the men had been taken to the Russian front.

The Punyis had made sure that our stay was to be a pleasant one. We were lodged in their largest room. We were served breakfast and supper. For lunch, Mrs. Punyi. made proper arrangements for us with the Widow who lived near the church.

I never lived in a village. Everything was new and unusual for me. In the evening when I found out that there was no electricity and we had to light a kerosene lamp I was thrilled. It seemed like I had gone back to the nineteenth century. This was great since I already imagined myself in the shoes of the 1848 revolutionary youth. I was part of the fight against the Germanization of Hungary.

Next morning, I got up early and went outside. I saw some young children herding their animals toward the meadows. There were all sorts. Mainly cows and geese. To my surprise there were quite a few goats too. I was fascinated by them. My favorite book had been Babar. In this book there was an illustration depicting a country outing in his brand new red sport car. In the illustration there is a young country girl standing with a goat beside her. When I was two Papa used to read me this story. He never missed pointing out that the young girl was Mama, and the goat, Mancí, is her pet. I loved the story. I tried to find out everything about Mancí. Mama always flatly denied that she ever had a goat. She also disliked being compared to a country girl. After seeing so many goats, especially

newborn kids. I was determined to have one. I started to beg non stop. Andrew took my side. He told Mama it would be a good idea to buy one. This would keep me busy and out of trouble.

In a few days Mama bought me a two day old kid. I was euphoric. It was wonderful that Papa's supposedly fictional story had become reality. Naturally we named the goat Manci.

How to feed this 'baby' was our first concern. Since she was only two days old we had to bottle feed her. So we bought baby bottles and nipples. She was adorable but we had no idea of all the trouble she would cause. When she started to have teeth, she chewed up the nipples. Even to the third village away we bought up all the nipples. We did not have much trouble walking Manci. She did not mind being on a dog leash. She took me for a walk, but did not pull like a dog.

Days, weeks were going by. Manci was growing but we still bottle-fed her. She was not really bad. Just full of mischief. For example, she ate some of András' chess pieces. When András noticed this, he became really angry. He started to beat my poor little Manci with his belt. Naturally I got hysterical. I should not have worried. Manci was a smart cookie. She knew how to take care of herself. Not long after this incident she jumped on András' bed and peed on it. It was clear that this was her revenge, since she had been already housebroken...

Around Easter we had a great scare. We were having lunch, as usual, at the Widow's. And, as always the food was delicious. We were already eating dessert when Mama began to comment upon the excellent quality of the meal. She emphasized in particular the meat. She also wanted to know how it came about that the Widow was able to buy veal. The Widow seemed somewhat surprised. "Veal?", she said, "This was not veal. This was the meat of a kid." We looked horrified. "If a goat is milk fed then his flesh tastes like veal..." I have no idea how much more explanation the Widow gave. I jumped up from the table and ran as fast as I could. On the way I was crying. I kept repeating "We have eaten Manci." Even before I opened the door I could hear Manci. I was relieved. After all we hadn't eaten her. I was happy but it was never the same again. My little

Manci was in danger too. She was in danger of being eaten and I could not do much about it, except to spread a rumor. Manci no longer lived only on milk but would eat all kinds of things. Mama was also concerned that Manci won't be able to escape her fate. In the end she will be eaten.

When we had to leave it was impossible to take a goat with us. As a last attempt to save her life, Mama gave money to the Punyis. She asked them to protect Manci...

MADONNAS OF YESTERYEAR

Mama was used to having her own life. From her earliest age she had treasured her independence and protected her privacy. Now, she was living in the same room with us and Manci, the goat. There was not much to decorate. On a daily basis she still managed to rearrange the few pieces of furniture. All three of us were reading a lot. She was reading Don Quixote in French, András was reading American Indian adventure stories by Karl May I was reading poems about heroic small nations resisting powerful unjust powers. We were living in three totally different make-believe worlds. Manci was the only thing that we had in common.

Mama and András had forbidden me to speak to the villagers. This included our hosts the Puny is too. They were scared that I might give away the secret of our true identity. I decided all the same that I should at least talk to the women of the Punyi household. I was determined to find out how all these women had managed without their men. I did not have to wait long. We needed goat milk for Manci. I volunteered to fetch it. I was granted permission. Getting the milk was my first step. Soon I was allowed to watch how the goats were milked. After this, I accompanied Mrs. Punyi when she went to feed the animals. I was very careful to speak as little as possible and not reveal our secret. This was not hard. Besides the animals what else could we have spoken about?

As I was making my rounds with Mrs. Punyi, I came to realize that perhaps we might have looked suspicious. Not because we were in hiding using false papers but

because we were city folks. Up till now I had never thought about these differences. At home I knew only one peasant, our cook Betty. I looked upon her as a peasant because of her country dialect. As for her manners and attire, I thought them to be 'cook style'. On summer vacations, visiting Mama's parents, I saw a few genuine peasant girls. They were my grandmother's servants. I never talked to them. But on Sunday afternoons when they were getting ready for their afternoon off I loved to watch them dressing themselves up. I was fascinated by the layers of skirts that they put on. I could see that they were not being worn in just any old way. There was some rule that guided the choice of the number and color of the skirts. I enjoyed watching their swaying walk as they were leaving. I saw hardly any such girls in Szarvaskő.

Sunday everybody went to Church. On a few occasions I was allowed to go with the Punyis. I loved to go because I could see the women from the village in their Sunday attire. I noticed that not everyone was wearing the same number of skirts and there was a significant difference in the choice of color. I found out soon that they had to dress according to a strict tradition. Their clothing revealed not only their age but also their marital status. From the shawl one could tell immediately whether the person was single, married or widowed. I was shocked that young widows had to dress like old women and that you could tell an old maid from her clothes. I could not help thinking of Mama and the hats of her fantasy. She was fortunate, after all, she had not been born to be a peasant.

One day when I was playing with Andrew he threw my ball far away. It went as far as the creek. I went to fetch it. When I got near the water, I came upon a dozen women. I was amazed. They were washing clothes in the creek. I watched them. It was not an easy task. I had never seen such thing. In Petőfi's **Gallant John** I read about Iluska washing clothes in the creek but I did not pay much attention to the washing itself. I was more interested in Iluska's suffering at the hands of her wicked stepmother and Gallant's love for Iluska. Watching these women I started to understand that peasant women lived a very hard and more humdrum life...

I would have loved to learn how life was in Szarvaskő before the men were taken away. I did not. I could not even visualize Blanka, Mrs. Punyi's daughter-in-law, with her husband. Blanka was barely twenty and very beautiful. Even Mama agreed with

that...Everyday she was waiting for a letter from the front. It never came. I started to imagine Blanca the young widow being forced to dress as an old woman. I considered it a great injustice. I also thought about Icuka, the 16 year old daughter of the Punyis. It was customary to marry within the village. With all the men gone, and probably hardly any to return, I worried that nobody will be left to marry her. I could see Icuka the old maid. Poor women of Szarvaskő. They had a very hard life and the future did not seem to hold much good in store for them...

GENDARMES AND DRUMMER BOYS

In more ways than one, my life changed forever in Szarvaskő. Never before had I been allowed to go out alone. A few days after our arrival Mama did not object to it. The village was so small that there were not many places to go to. It seemed quite safe. There was neither traffic nor strangers in the streets. The gendarmes were the keepers of law and order. I was not familiar with them. I have not even seen one close-up before. My limited knowledge was based on folk ballads. I never read anything good about them. They were much feared by the poor. They were the ones who came and took them away when they got in trouble with the landlord. Now I could see them in flesh and blood. From a safe distance I studied them carefully. Their helmet adorned with cock-feather, their gun on their shoulder, their black boots, their arrogant poise - projected brutal force. When I found out that the gendarmes were constantly searching for 'suspicious strangers' I feared them even more.

After lunch, whenever the weather permitted I went to play with András. There was no playground in the village. We went outside in the woods near a small river. When it was time to go home András was the scout. He went ahead while I was supposed to stay behind and wait for his signal. If he did not signal, I was supposed to wait 10 minutes. If he did not return I had to flee. At each return I was full with anxiety. If András would not have come back for me, it would have meant only one thing: Mama and András were taken away by the gendarmes and I was left alone in the world. I knew that the grownups

were counting on this possibility. Money was sewn in my coat lining. I was terrified. I had money but what could I do all alone in this dangerous world?

For many weeks our return to Mama went without any problem. One day, when I was no longer worried of being left alone in the world, András did not signal. I waited for him to come back for me. He was gone for more than ten minutes. I was too scared to flee. I was very quiet. I decided to wait another five minutes. Suddenly I heard András whistling. He came back for me! I was euphoric. I was not left alone in the world.. He was quite shaken. He told me that he had seen two gendarmes entering the house. He was concerned. He waited for awhile. Finally the gendarmes left the house without Mama. We went back and were happy to see Mama safe and sound. The gendarmes had come because during holy week we did not go to church. According to our papers we were Protestants Since the church in the village was Catholic, the gendarmes accepted Mama's excuse. From this moment on Mama lived in constant fear. She was convinced that sooner or later they are going to take us away. She told us that it was only question of time.

I walked in the village all by myself. I was trying to discover interesting things. The first day I came upon the town crier. He was making announcements with the beat of his drum. I was amazed. I had no idea that they still existed. I read about them in fairy tales when they announced., how could one obtain the hand of the princess, or about the challenge to kill the dragon. I stood on the square with the villagers. I listened carefully to each announcement. They were mostly public service announcements.for example that the vet is going to vaccinate all the animals. I kept going on the square. Mama and András would never come. Myself, I would not miss a day. A matter of fact I was waiting for an important announcement. I was right. Finally it happened.

One day the town crier announced that all Jews must wear a yellow star. He also enumerated all the things they were no longer allowed to do and the places that they were forbidden to enter. Finally , that Christians are no longer allowed to go to Jewish doctors. Upon hearing this the villagers started to mumble. They were saying that they are not going to go to another doctor. They rather wear the yellow star when they were to go to see their own Jewish doctor. I was quite pleased. I already heard about the king of

Denmark, he also wore the yellow star to show his solidarity with his Jewish subjects I was proud that the good people of Szarvaskő were as noble as the Danish King. I went home right away and gave the news to Mama. We were very quiet that evening. We were too sad even to speak to each another.

There were not any Jews in the village. So nobody had to wear the yellow star. I was waiting impatiently to see if really the villagers are going to wear a yellow star when they go to see their Jewish doctor in Eger. There was no time for it. Soon there was much worst news. Before this news was announced I could tell that something of major significance is going to happen. The town crier did not come alone. There were two gendarmes on his side. We learned that next day convoys are going to come through the village. There are going to be Jews taken in carts to work. We were warned not to speak to them or give any kind of aid. If anyone was to disobey this order, that person will be taken away with the Jews. Everyone was stunned. Beside me an old man remarked "Today they are taking them, tomorrow they are going to take us..." I hurried home with horrible news. At night we started to hear the rolling sound of wheels. The carts kept going. I put the pillow over my head, I could not stand hearing. . I wanted the carts to stop. I did not want to believe that such thing could happen and did not want to wonder who were these people. We did not go outside. I did not see the people but I heard that they were women and children, and old people. I thought of Biblical times. Building of the pyramids. What was Germans' design? What kind of work could this people perform? I did not find any answer...

Mama's reaction frightened us. She told András that she was envying these Jews. They gave up and accepted their destiny. She would like to do the same. András told her that if she wished to join them, it is her choice but we are not ready yet to give up. Fortunately Mama did not feel like giving up alone and we continued going on with our underground life...

BAMBI, A JEWISH LITTLE DOG

When we arrived to Budapest, we went immediately to Jenő's home. During our absence it had changed a great deal. It had become a refugee rescue center. Many people were now coming and going. Some came for false papers, others for a place to hide. The refugees were no longer only partisans, many were Jews. Some were both. Quite a few were persecuted only for being Jewish.

Jenő occupied the entire third floor. His private apartment, his dermatologist's office, the treatment salon, laboratory and stockroom were all on this floor. He had plenty of room for refugees, but it had become impossibly dangerous to let them be seen. So he built a separating wall in his stockroom, thereby creating a secret room. The entrance was concealed behind the storage shelves and it could shelter up to 20 persons. Papa was one of the frequent occupants.

By now our false papers were useless. Two Mária Cz's., two Iván Cz's., and a little girl who never was, could not live under the same roof. Mama and András moved out and went to live elsewhere. I was left with Jenő and Mária. I had a strange role to play. During the day when they were receiving visitors, I sat in the living room beside the table. The table was covered with a fringed cloth. While the grownups were talking, I was sitting quietly, braiding and unbraiding the tassels. Some guests knew my true identity, others did not. The outcome for me was always the same. Someone was supposed to take me home for the night. This went on for quite a while until one day an old lady arrived with a little dog. She was distinguished looking, kind and soft spoken. Her dog, Julie, was a brown dachshund. The two of us became immediately good friends. Lisa, her mistress, was quite surprised. Julie was not known to like children and in general did not easily make friends. Mária seized the opportunity and asked if Lisa would like to take me home. The old lady immediately agreed and said that if everything worked out, she was willing to keep me for longer. I thought I hit the jackpot.

I went to the children's room. While I was packing my bag, Granny came in and told me that Lisa knew my true identity. I asked her if Lisa had been pretty in her youth.

Granny told me that not only had Lisa been a famous beauty but also that during WWI she lost her husband and was widowed with a little girl. Laurent, her present husband, was a younger officer who had fallen madly in love with her and they were married shortly after the war. Laurent is still very much in love with her in spite of the fact that he is more than 10 years her junior... At this point they were calling me. It was time to go.

We took a taxi. The trip was quite short. Lisa lived in an apartment house at the foot of Castle Hill. As we entered the building she introduced me to the concierge. She told him that I was a war orphan niece. The concierge didn't say much. I became a bit impatient in the elevator. I could hardly wait. I was curious about Laurent and her apartment. When we entered I was quite surprised. Laurent was not at home. It was a little gray terrier who greeted us. "And who is this?" - I asked. "Bambi, a Jewish little dog." - replied Lisa. I did not understand. I had already experienced a lot of difficulty understanding "the Jewish question". I always thought that it was a religion. But now they continued to talk about race. On the other hand, I knew that dogs are categorized according to race, but I never heard that a dog could be Jewish. I looked at Julie. I looked at Bambi. To tell the truth neither of them looked Jewish, to me. Let's see. I told myself, Julie is a dachshund. That is a German race. Bambi is a terrier. That is sort of British. I guess. Now the Germans were going to decide which dog is Jewish and which one is not.

Laurent came home late. He was youthful and distinguished. He looked like he stepped right out of a romantic English novel. Never in my life had I seen such a handsome man. He looked at his wife as still the famous beauty whom he had married long ago. I was entranced. We talked at length during supper. I was back in my element. I was euphoric. For the moment I was Mimikoko again...

For several days I enjoyed life with Julie and Bambi. I lived happily among the beautiful antique furniture and my lovely hosts. Lisa even showed me her old photographs. In the evening sometimes she played the piano. I danced. They even let me sleep with Bambi. We were great comfort to each another, the two little refugees. But all good things must come to an end...

One day we went for a walk. Lisa was holding Julie's leash and I was holding Bambi's. Lisa decided to buy some ham for supper. The deli owner knew Julie, so she was

permitted to enter but Bambi had to stay outside. I did not want to tie her to a post so I stayed outside with her. A few minutes went by and then a man looking very much like a concierge came along and he said: "Hello Bambi. What are you doing here?" Unfortunately Bambi did not know that she was not supposed to answer and started to wag her tail. I was terrified. Papa always told me to be careful with concierges. Many of them were collaborators and informants. However, I did not lose my head. With a lisp, I said: "Sir you must be mistaken. This dog is not called Bambi. He is just a friendly dog. His owner is sitting in a cafe near by, and I am just walking her." When I had said this, Bambi and I started to run as fast as we could. About 15 minutes later Lisa and Julie arrived at our prearranged secret meeting place. She was very worried. Keeping an eye on us from the deli she had noticed the concierge-looking man. She thought that we ran away because he recognized me. She was relieved that it was Bambi and not me. I was still very agitated. She tried to calm me down and in the end she told me that it is not really Bambi who is Jewish but her Mistress. I remained upset I was not completely convinced that Bambi was not still in danger.

In the evening Lisa told Laurent about the incident. They both came to realize that anytime I could be recognized too.

On the next day, I was taken back to Jenő's.

AUNT BETH

After the invasion of Normandy Mama declared that she was sick and tired of being underground and alone with the children. She came up with the only solution. "Let's go to my sister Beth!" It was a most surprising suggestion. I had seen Beth only a few times. What I knew mainly about her was thanks to Mama. Just looking at her honeymoon photos taken in Venice and comparing them to Mama's in Paris, I could tell that they were opposites. Mama and Papa were standing in front of Notre Dame. They were both elegant and very proper. Mama was wearing pearls and a silk dress. She was holding her handbag just as a lady was supposed to do. Aunt Beth was standing in Saint Mark's Square. She was feeding the pigeons, had a deep suntan, her dress smart but coquettish, wearing a long string of pearls and showing off her legs. Her husband Jules

was standing behind her. It looked as though he was happy and proud to show off his young bride. I liked to look at this picture. I could tell that Aunt Beth was having a very good time. Basically, whenever anything negative was spoken about her it had to do with her having a good time. There was another major difference between the two sisters. Mama was crazy about dogs and cats, Beth was crazy about children. Mama always had a pet but her poor sister had great difficulty having a child. Finally a son, Tamás, was born. I was barely three when this important event occurred. I wanted to see my baby cousin immediately. This was not possible. He was premature. I did not understand the meaning of 'premature.' Mama then told me he had the weight of a frying chicken. I was amazed. Since I was not allowed to see my cousin I started to look at live chickens in the market. I kept pointing them out. I was determined to find out the exact size of Tamás. It almost became an obsession. I went so far that at a Sunday lunch as we were eating fried chicken. I held up a leg in my hand and I asked Papa: "Is cousin Tamás' leg as small as this?" After a careful scrutiny, Papa replied, "It is different. It has a different shape. He is not a chicken.". Soon after this, I finally saw my cousin and he did not look at all like a chicken. To this point, such was the sum of my knowledge of my aunt and cousin.

After a short discussion it did not seem to be a bad idea to go to live openly with Aunt Beth. We used to live downtown in the Belváros which was a quite different neighborhood from Zugló, a district near the outskirts of Budapest. It was unlikely that anyone would look for us there..

Aunt Beth was overjoyed by our arrival. Straightaway she went to the kitchen to cook. Mama followed her. I would witness the first of the many disagreements to come. Mama was upset because she found the food too buttery and too heavy. "No wonder you are having constant weight problems"- she remarked. Then she pointed out that one should not cook in a décollete silk robe. While the sisters tried to straighten out their differences, András and I went to play with Tamás.

Not too many days later, in the morning we were awakened by the loud sound of the doorbell. Two men in civilian clothes were standing at the door. They were from Counterintelligence. They had come to arrest us. I was well prepared. I knew I had to behave according to our strategic plans. The two men kept a close eye on Mama. They

enjoyed watching her dress. András would come one way and go another. In the end he managed to depart the premisses unnoticed. It was my turn to do the same. But it was too late. They noticed that András had escaped. I carried out the alternative plan. I hid in a trunk. I heard the men cursing, threatening my aunt that they were going to come back and if she did not turn us up, she was going to be in big trouble. There was a great silence. I emerged from the trunk and hid myself in a cupboard. I was waiting. It seemed like eternity but it was only few hours until they opened the cupboard door. It was my aunt. Beside her a suspicious and vulgar looking man. Aunt Beth looked quite shaken. She did not say anything except that this man was going to take me away. I was in a state of shock. I followed the man without a word, obediently. We walked for almost an hour. The neighborhood had become totally unfamiliar to me. The man never spoke a word. Finally we arrived at a small house with a garden. We were received by an old couple. The Old Lady, without saying a word, took my hand and led me into a room. "Go to sleep, little girl. Don't you worry. I'll wake you up for supper." She left the room. I fell on the bed and into a deep sleep. The Old Lady was standing by my bed when she woke me for supper. I followed her and I was seated at the table. I looked at the Old Man and the Old Woman. I suddenly realized I did not know anything. I did not know who was the suspicious vulgar looking man who had brought me here. Whether and when he is going to come back for me? Who were these old people? What do they know? And what is my name?. I do not know my own name. The Old Lady called me only 'Little Girl.' I was in a state of panic. I thought that the safest thing that I could do was to remain silent forever. I hardly ate. I cried a lot.

After four days the suspicious vulgar looking man returned. I was told that he was going to take me away. "Good-bye, Little Girl"- said the Old Lady as I was departing I had become so used to my own muteness that I did not return her farewell but could only place a kiss on her cheek.

I AM SAGITTARIUS

I had followed the suspicious vulgar looking man without saying a word. As soon as we were on the street he said: "Your Mother and brother are both O.K. They are free. You are Katalin Rápolthy, war orphan. You have lost your parents during a carpet bombing. I am taking you to the country, to my sister's Farm. You can cry, but keep your mouth shut." I was very happy to find out my name. I still did not know the man's. I even did not know who he was. This did not bother me at all. At least I could never give him away...

We went on to the railway station. In the train I sat quietly never uttering a single word. On the other hand, the suspicious vulgar looking man kept talking to everybody. He immediately introduced himself: "I am Sagittarius!" So this was the man's name. It was a strange name. Especially because in Hungarian it also meant Arrow Cross man.³ I started to wonder. Was this simply his name, or was he making a statement about his political affiliation? I excluded the possibility that he might have been speaking about his zodiac sign. Because of several air raids the train stopped and we had to get out. Sagittarius was cursing the Americans, Jews and Bolsheviks. He did it very convincingly. I started to worry. I wondered if I was not kidnapped by an Arrow Cross man and in order to rescue me Papa will be walking into a trap.

It was becoming dark by the time we arrived to Bekescsaba. We went to what turned out to be the Judge's house. We were to spend the night there. My bed, a leather couch, was already made up. I was to sleep in the Judge's office, but I could not because the clock's pendulum struck every fifteen minutes. Since I could not really sleep, I looked around. I was intrigued by all the official papers and seals on the Judge's desk. I thought that some might have been useful. But I did not dare to touch any of them. At breakfast Sagittarius went on cursing the Jews. He remarked that he could tell that they were all gone because he felt that he was breathing a cleaner air. Afterwards he borrowed the Judge's motorcycle. Sagittarius put me behind him and we sped away heading toward the Farm.

³ Hungarian Fascist.

As we were whizzing down on a small dusty country road, I was thinking again about Papa. I remembered the two of us running together. He made up a little song: "Let's run. Let's run. Let our hair be undone..." I loved this song. It made me laugh. I had a lot of hair but Papa had hardly any...

The Farm was about fifteen miles away. Never in my life had I been on a farm, just in a village. I thought that they must be about the same. I was very surprised when we arrived. It looked quite different. Sagittarius' sister Ilus had expected us. She was happy to see her brother and she was friendly to me. The whole family: Ilus' in-laws, Pistike, her 12 year old son and Lea, her 4 year old daughter, all came out to greet us. The grownups then went inside to drink. They had important matters to discuss. Meanwhile Pistike showed me some of the farm animals. After a while Sagittarius had to leave. He spoke to me only when he was getting on the motorcycle: "In case nobody comes for you, my sister agreed to bring you up."

Upon hearing the departing words of Sagittarius, I felt as though I had become a war orphan for real.

WAR ORPHAN ON THE FARM

Seconds later the motorcycle and Sagittarius vanished into thin air. I could only see a large cloud of dust behind them. I was again on my own. At dinner time I realized that I was being really treated as a war orphan. Everybody tried his best to make me be assimilated. It was quite obvious that I might as well have come from another planet but I would have never thought that even my name was not acceptable in this milieu. I was told that Katalin is too stern. Only city folks would call a little girl like me Katalin. Here on the farm Katica⁴ is more appropriate and anyway this name is much more becoming to me. From then on this was my name.

⁴ Katica in Hungarian also means lady bug

The first night I tried to become acquainted with my new persona. I started to refresh my memory regarding war orphans. I tried very hard but Shirley Temple in the Little Princess was the only thing that came to mind. I got scared when I recalled the part where they started to mistreat her because her father's money had ran out. She was reduced to being a Cinderella. But now I thought about the story of Cinderella. In the end she was rescued by Prince Charming. After all the story had a happy ending. I found this very reassuring and I went to sleep quite happy.

Next morning I was no longer thinking about the past. I decided to learn how to live on the farm as fast as possible. Every day I went to the fields with Pistike. I did not really work. I only accompanied him when he carried food to the harvesters. I learned to walk barefoot in fields of stubble. I also learned how to drive a tractor and even a combine. Nobody asked me anything about my previous life. "It is better if we do not remind the little orphan of her past"- they thought. I started enjoying myself. It was becoming an exciting summer vacation. Time by time I wondered what kind of life I could have on this farm. I was quite sure of myself but at the same time I remembered that I was very vulnerable and after all just a little girl.

I did not have to wait long to find out exactly how vulnerable I was. Pistike and I were coming home from the field. On the road I noticed two dogs. One was on top of the other. I asked Pistike: "What are they doing?" "They are fucking, what else !"answered Pistike. "Fucking? What is that?" I continued asking. Pistike realized, that I lacked the fundamental knowledge of the birds and the bees. He told me to sit down at the side of the road and he would try to enlighten me. I did not quite understand. He noticed this and he started to give examples. When I asked him if she was not married what kind of woman would do such things. He told me the story of the Gypsy Woman. This Gypsy Woman happened in fact to live nearby. In exchange for cigarettes she was willing to oblige any man. After this he told me stories about the rape and seduction of little girls. Pistike noticed fear in my eyes. He put his arms around me and gave his assurance that he would always protect me and my virginity. Next day, being an enlightened little girl I was shocked by the realization that I had never noticed before how much fucking was going on around me...

Almost a month went by when Ilus received a letter from Budapest. It was from her brother. In a few days he was going to come with my governess, Mária Sz. I was quite happy. I was excited. Mária had been my first nurse. She had been a mother to me and I loved her as such. I was waiting with impatience. At last they arrived. Sagittarius did not come on a motorcycle but in a car. He was first to get out and run round to open the door. A beautiful elegant lady, with summer hat, in high heeled sandals and painted toenails emerged from the car. As soon as I had seen the car I had started to run toward it. When I saw the lady I stopped in my tracks. This was not Mária, this was Mama! I was petrified. "How is she going to fit in?" - I asked myself. "Not at all." - was my immediate answer . I began to pray for a miracle. In the end the situation turned out to be not so hopeless. Ilus was fascinated. She had never seen such an elegant lady in the flesh. The ones she had seen had been only in the movie magazines.

The first night Mama told me the story of her escape from the Counterintelligence men at Bern's apartment. After she had been taken downstairs she refused to get into the car. She told the two men that she always became car sick. They did not want any mess in their car so they took her on the tramway. When the train stopped across from Rokus Hospital Mama made a scene. She threw herself on the floor of the tram. She began to scream incoherently. She gave the impression of a mad woman who had just swallowed a lot of sleeping pills. The crowd, and even the conductor, demanded that she be taken to the hospital. The two men had no choice. They left off the train and took Mama to the Emergency entrance. The doctor on duty happened to know Mama from the French Bookstore. He told the men to stay outside. Mama was given a nurse's uniform and escaped through the back entrance. I was listening to her with the greatest admiration but at the same time I was very concerned. I knew too well that Mama would not at all be interested in giving the same top quality performance playing the role of a governess. She could not help it. This was not her style...

Ilus continued admiring her. Luckily she had not the foggiest idea what a real governess was like. I spent less and less time with Pistike. This was expected. The friendship of a little girl who has a governess with a farm boy was not at all *comme il faut*.

Time was flying and the number of Mama's Egyptian cigarettes' was diminishing. Now I became really worried. I could not help thinking about the Gypsy Woman. I was scared. In order to have cigarettes Mama will have to do the same thing... Fortunately it never came to that. Suddenly everything happened at once. Not only was the cigarette supply going down but Mama told me that the original writing on my false birth certificate had resurfaced. She also declared that the Russians were too near for her to feel safe. She was afraid of being raped. She would feel much more secure in Budapest. That was the perfect excuse. They all sympathized with her concern. Within a few days Sagittarius came for us.

The family who almost had adopted me was crying. They were sad to see me leave. I was told if I ever needed a home I'd be always welcome. Just before I got in the car Pistike whispered in my ear: "Who is going to protect you now?"

SZERVITA SQUARE NUMBER 4

When we came back from the Farm we went straight to Jenő's. For us this was the world's most obvious thing to do. Since it was summer, the boys Iván and Ádám were already gone. As usual, they were spending their vacation in Tahi.⁵ Mama and I moved into their room. The very first thing that I did was to take a bath. I had gotten completely used to life on the farm but I never stopped longing for a bathroom. To take a bath in the open in a wooden tub was great fun in the summer. But what would happen in the winter?-I often asked. I went to the bathroom to draw my bath. I would have never imagined that just turning the hot and cold water faucet could be such a thrill. Jenő had given me a very special bath salt and Mária brought me a huge piquet bath towel. It was like long, long ago...I remained in the water for a long time. I did not want to come out. I felt that as long as I remained in the bathtub everything would be O.K. There was peace on earth.

⁵ A small village by the Danube, North of Budapest

During the last two months the third floor on Szertvita Square Number 4 had become a safe heaven for victims of Nazi persecution. By now Jenő was saving not only those whom he had known He was helping every one. Day after day people were coming by the dozen. Jenő also made a daily round in the Ghetto. He was taking food and medicine, and if need be medical assistance too. In his apartment the hidden secret room was occupied to full capacity. They had hired a new maid. She was Márta K., a Jewish Montessori pedagogue. They made her work hard and also she was exposed to a lot of vulgar speech. Since she was not familiar with the habits and manners of this household, she thought that she was being exploited and abused because she was Jewish. The poor woman never understood that this was the normal state of affairs.

Mária was working more than ever. She had supervised the preparation of skin products and she was giving several facials per day. She had hardly any time for sleeping. She never said anything against her husband's rescue missions. She never expressed any objection. This was quite amazing because the entire family had become endangered. In order to cope she found refuge in the bottle. She was drinking and smoking more and more. In the end her health started to decline rapidly...

I spent most of my time in the children's room. I read a lot and played by myself. It was a nice large room. There was plenty of space for playing ball and skipping rope. I would have like to go outside to the balcony but I was forbidden. It was too risky. Somebody might see me. Time by time I disobeyed. I crawled out to the balcony and I peeked out between the openings in the railing. One day I could see that a Hungarian military automobile was parked in front of the house. A handsome colonel and a pretty little blond were just getting out of the car. I took a better look. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was Mária's sister Ida and her husband Imre Cs. I was very happy because Ida was one of my favorite grownups. She was different from Mária and Mama. She did not ignore little girls. Whenever she had come to visit she always paid attention to me too. Besides they were a very interesting couple. Imre did not get the army's official permission to marry Ida because she was not wealthy enough. The colonel was very much in love but would not give up his career as the Prince of Wales had given up his throne for the woman he loved. Jenő had a good idea. He suggested that Imre should adopt Ida. This way she would have the same legal name. At the same time they should be married in a

civil ceremony without the knowledge of the army. Once adopted and married, Ida can show herself in public as Imre's sister. They did exactly that. Their life was full of strange intrigues. Being pretty Ida was much courted by the other officers. She attended dances and even had some rendezvous. At times marriage was proposed. Naturally they had to ask her colonel brother's permission. This was most embarrassing.

The visit of Ida was a very cheerful event. She helped her sister in the laboratory but she did not give any facials. Whenever she had some free time she was visiting with me. She changed my hairdo and even painted my nails. She made me forget that I was in seclusion.

THE CASE OF THE UNTALENTED SCULPTOR

I was preparing to see Papa again. I was very excited. I had not seen him for more than two months! Mama tried to act calm but I could feel that she was completely stressed out. Mária prepared a small "care package" for Papa. She had sent some of his favorite foods, drinks and cigarettes. Meanwhile, Jenő came home and the grownups had one more coffee together. Mama and I left afterwards.

The secret hiding place was located at the foot of Castle Hill near the Chain Bridge. We went on foot. As we were crossing the bridge Mama told me that we were heading for an artist's atelier in the Castle Bazaar. I was told that when we get there I should be on the lookout for the tramways. We were not to give the secret knock at the door unless a tramway was blocking the view from the other side. We had to be absolutely sure that nobody would notice our presence. We were lucky. The tramway was just approaching when we got there. Mama knocked the secret signal on the window. Slowly a glass pane was put slightly ajar. There was an old man standing behind it. He had long white hair and a mustache. He was wearing a full artist's smock. "Hurry! Hurry up"-said the old man. I was stunned. It was Papa's voice. Yes, indeed it was Papa. Once inside I had a chance to take a closer look at this 'old man.* Without any doubt Papa was beyond recognition. When I told him this, he immediately began to show off his

stooped walk and appropriate trembling voice. Soon András appeared. He was quite at home. He had already spent two weeks there. Now he was helping Papa to unpack the "care package". Once opened, we sat down to eat.

After we had finished eating, Papa showed me around his Kingdom. Despite the hermit-like existence he led, he had elaborately outfitted himself for his many underground activities. The emergency escape exit was the most fascinating thing that he showed me. At the entrance, there was a small rug. He raised it up. There was a sheet of metal underneath. He lifted that. A deep, dark hole led down to the sewers. Papa explained to me that just in case we could not leave as we came, we could always leave in this manner. I felt like I was on the verge of becoming a Victor Hugo heroine in *Les Misérables*.

We joined Mama and András. Papa told us in detail how he transformed himself into the old sculptor. Jenő had an old sculptor friend Lajos.. He was a very nice, decent man. When he heard about Jenő's rescue activities, he offered to help. This happened just when they no longer knew how Papa could be hidden. Lajos turned over his papers to Papa and he also gave full use of his atelier. Fine, but Papa did not look like an old artist. He stayed on a while longer in Jenő's concealed room waiting for his hair and mustache to grow. When his look became acceptable, Lajos came to fetch him. Papa was taken to the atelier and introduced to his fellow artists as the crazy untalented sculptor nephew of Lajos from the country. Papa moved into the studio. It came to work out perfectly. Time by time he was even able to give shelter to several of his friends in the underground.

Night began to fall. By now it would not have been safe for us to leave. We had to spend the night in the atelier. Before going to bed, we started to talk about the sculptures. With few exceptions they were all patriotic war memorials and were very large in size. Papa especially called our attention to the largest one. This was of a private raising his bayonet ready for the attack. Papa told us that at times some of his 'guests' would waken in the middle of the night to the fright of their lives from this. Upon hearing this story Mama started to look at the statues more carefully. She found each statue more worthless than the next. András and I were just listening. Since I came to the atelier he had hardly spoken to me. Mama and Papa continued putting down the sculptor. It seemed there

might be no end to it. András decided to say something to me: "You see how incredibly snobbish they are? It is not good enough for them that Lajos. is a good and decent man. They feel shortchanged because he is not a good sculptor ..."

THE RED-HAIRED SQUIRE

The manufacturing of false papers had become a cottage industry. There was free access to blank forms and official seals too. Some people did not feel secure until they had a whole collection of papers's. It was hard to tell which might save one's life. It was also not clear which system worked better. To use someone else's identity or to invent a non-existing person? Since I had been the only person in the the family who had become a non-existent, the little girl who never was, this question bothered me.

During one of the American carpet bombings an interesting incident took place. Our actor friend, Tamás M., was Aryan but was forced underground because of his involvement in the Communist Movement. Being an actor, changing his identity constantly came as something quite natural to him. For safety's sake he had a repertoire of false identities. For each one he had the proper papers and a suitable disguise.

In June, Tamás was walking in an unfamiliar neighborhood when unexpectedly alarm sirens gave warning of approaching American bombers'. At the sound of the alert, policemen directed pedestrians off the street and into shelters. Tamás did not want to draw any attention to himself. So, with no argument he went down into a designated shelter. He was wearing a red wig and had the demeanor of a country squire because he was carrying the papers of his uncle, a fascist sympathizer and really a country squire. The shelter was crowded. Besides the local residents there were many who had been just passersby. To be on the safe side Tamás stayed near the exit. It was a long and heavy raid. Finally, it was over. For some strange reason the policemen became overzealous. They decided to check everybody's papers. Because Tamás was next to the exit they checked his first. As the policeman was studying his papers, he remarked: "Aren't you a lucky man, you were caught in this air raid right in front of your home" Tamás realized that he

was at his uncle's Budapest address. "Yes, oh yes"- he mumbled. At the same time he hastily looked around. He was somewhat stunned. He noticed his uncle there in the far corner of the shelter, very pale and trembling. Tamás elegantly lifted his hat, clacked his heels, said good bye and dashed out of the neighborhood as fast as he could.

Our actor friend was laughing as he would come to the end his story. He had only one regret. He wished he could have stayed to see his fascist sympathizer uncle's face when he had to prove that not he but the other who had vanished was the real impostor.

I began to hear more and more about exit visas, letters of safe conduct and collective passports. I wondered what was going on. I could not ask anybody for information because I learned by now that it is safer to know less. Some people were buying these documents, others were selling them. Then, there were those to whom it was sent from abroad as a free gift. Once I overheard that Papa told Mama that it would be nice if someone would send us such gift. I eavesdropped but still I could not understand what was going on. Then, one day Papa told us that we have to go to the photographer for passport pictures. We shall need them for our Portuguese Passports. I did not understand. Why Portuguese? I never heard that being talked about. Then I recalled that at the beginning of the war Mama had been sitting with her friend Mária on the terrace of Carlton Hotel. They were smoking, drinking coffee and enjoying themselves. A charming couple was sitting at the next table. They were speaking in an unfamiliar language. Mária asked Mama: "Do you know what language are they speaking?" "Portuguese"- replied Mama. While she was blowing smoke rings she further commented: " This is the only language that I would never bother with. This is definitely the ugliest language..." Mama was the single source of my knowledge of Portugal. I could then see now how desperate we had become. We no longer had any choice. We were going to become citizens of a country where the world's ugliest language was spoken. I also learned that it was British Intelligence that made the arrangements for this passport. Again what came the greatest surprise for me, the grownups had already prepared for ahead of time.

It was not easy to get to the photographer who lived in the same building as the Matyas Pince Restaurant. From Szervita Square we had to cross downtown where we were well known. Papa and András went separately one by one. I went with Mama. This seemed safe enough because in the past they had hardly ever seen me alone with Mama.

We got as far the traffic light near Erzsébet Bridge. We crossed the street and Mama went into the Stummer Candy Store. I stayed outside. The policeman controlling the traffic light suddenly noticed me. "Mimikoko, my dear Mimikoko, I am so glad to see you." I could not believe my eyes. This was the charming handsome young man who every week last year had brought me a little bouquet of flowers. I used to meet him when I went to the playground with Edith, my governess. Naturally, I liked this policeman very much. I was a romantic. I was a dreamer but also I was aware that I was only eight years old and he must have been at least twenty. I supposed and found it quite reasonable that he was really interested in Edith. Even now, I thought the same. I did not wait till he asked. I volunteered the information: "I am sorry but I don't know whatever happened to Edith." I was being quite apologetic. "Don't you see. It is not Edith but you whom I love." Seeing my total surprise, he added: "Why are you surprised? Don't you know about Laura and Beatrice?" I thought I was going to faint... Mama just came out of the store. She saw me on the verge of fainting, then she saw the policeman. She became frightened. She thought for a moment I had been found out. Taking a second look at the policeman, she realized that we were in no danger. As we left together, I wanted to tell her all that had happened. I wanted to know if such love was possible. But I did not dare. I thought that she would not believe me, plus I'd receive a scolding.

The photographer took our pictures. We waited while he developed them. I was curious if the photo would reveal what had just happened to me in front of the Candy Store. I could not figure it out. One thing was sure. Even if my portrait revealed my secret in any way, no one paid any notice.

On the way down in the elevator, Papa had given us instructions which way should we return to Szervita Square. I wished to see the policeman once more. I thought that I ought to say good-bye to him. After all I was on the verge of becoming Portuguese and we were leaving for Lisbon. But Papa had chosen an other route. I did not have the chance to say good-bye. We did not go to Portugal either...

WITCHES' LAIR

The situation grew worse. We had become homeless nomads of the underground. Papa was still in hiding by himself. Mama, András and I, we were moving around constantly. Sometimes the three of us together, some times I was just with Mama, other times just by myself. Week after week we would stay with different friends in Budapest. Eventually, we could no longer spend twenty four hours in the same place. We had to move nonstop. We would spend the day and the night in different people's apartments. On rare occasions we ended up with dear old friends.

The end of summer was approaching. The day was beautiful. The sun was shining in full splendor, the sky was clear blue without a cloud. Such a beautiful day reminded Mama of days past when she used to sit with her girlfriends on the Corso, on the terrace of Carlton Hotel. She remembered Márta P. She phoned her. Now, Márta was overjoyed to hear from her and she invited us for lunch that very day. News of the lunch cheered me up. András could not understand how Mama could come up with such a reckless idea, since Márta was Bobi's wife. In spite of the fact that Bobi had left Márta when the war broke out in order to continue his intelligence work for the British in Istanbul, it was Bobi who had gotten Papa involved in British intelligence activities in Hungary. In this way Papa's name had been placed on the Gestapo's wanted list. I knew that András was right but I could not care less. I had the same nostalgia as Mama. I was also longing for the old times when beautiful elegant grownups used to walk on the Corso. Márta's svelte silhouette materialized in front of my eyes. I remembered how beautiful she was in her poppy print linen dress and her charm had no limit. It had been too long since I saw such grownups. I had no doubt that such a lunch was worth taking all the risks.

Márta lived near the Parliament, on Bathory Street. As we were getting close András remarked: "I hope she will be at home." He was right to wonder. After all, Márta had the reputation of being a very unpredictable woman. We wanted to avoid the Concierge. So we did not take the elevator. Márta was in fact at home. She opened the door. She was more provocative than she had been in her poppy print dress. She was now wearing a navy polka dot silk robe. The top and the bottom were half-buttoned. They revealed her gorgeous body and especially her long sun-tanned legs. Her flat was a small

studio. From the kitchen a wonderful odor was lingering in the air. Márta was very cheerful. This was not the Corso but she remained the same dreamlike figure whom I always remembered in her poppy print dress. Mama followed her into the kitchen. She wanted to give a hand. This was almost impossible. In the kitchen chaos reigned. I was curious. I went to see what was going on and could watch from the doorway. Márta was doing the cooking. The sleeve of her silk robe kept dropping into the frying pan while she was preparing the chicken. She was least bothered by this. On the other hand, Mama had become quite upset. Her "help" consisted in her attempt to save Márta's sleeve. It was quite comical. But the food turned out to be delicious. Márta kept up a carefree conversation. Time by time she laughed like a young girl. Later on, when we gave our account to Papa each of us was telling a different story. Mama spoke with horror about Márta's sleeve, András about the food that was unexpectedly so delicious. And I was speaking about the enchanting beauty and charm of Márta.

From Márta's we went on to Leo. With his wife he lived few blocks from Márta, in Falk Miksa Street. The childless couple invited us for the night. Leo, was an Armenian painter and his wife Borika a craftsman. We never visited them before. They were cafe acquaintances. The tastefully decorated high ceilinged apartment held many interesting art objects. We were cordially received. Borika took me under her wing while Leo was playing chess with András. After dinner the grownups drank cognac and Leo started to talk about his youth. He told us the story of the Turkish massacre of the Armenians. "What a horrible gloomy story!"-I said to myself. Perhaps in his own way, he was trying to tell András that it is possible to survive even a massacre, grow up and live the good life.

We went to bed late. I was almost asleep when I overheard Borika talking to Mama. She was talking about the deportation and what was happening to the children. This was more horrifying than the massacre of the Armenians Especially when I heard about the medical experiments. I came then to realize what might happen to me. I could not go to sleep. I tried to escape in my thoughts. I recalled the handpainted buttons that Borika used to make for us. Mama had many of them and I had a few. Borika always discussed the design of mine with me. I remembered my favorite one. It had been made

for my Easter dress when I was four. It depicted a white bunny. Finally, I went to sleep dreaming about the little white rabbit.

The little white rabbit took me back in time. I was four again. This was the time when I did not want to accept that witches did not exist. My governess thought that I am afraid of them . She tried everything to convince me . No matter how hard she tried I would not give them up. I told her that I was not afraid because I know there are good witches too. Whenever we used to drive through the tunnel under Castle Hill seeing the mysterious door I would declare that this is the home of the Good Witches of Buda. As polite little girls are supposed to do, I never missed greeting them with a hello. This was the unquestionable proof that they really exist. With this stand, no one ever tried again to convince me of the opposite

From this night I would think a great deal about the Good Witches of Buda who lived under Castle Hill. I decided that if I ever run out of places to hide, I'll join them.

COMEDY OF PRETENDERS

It was already the middle of October. The Allied Forces were approaching. We were waiting for the war to end. Because of Papa's British Intelligence connections, we knew about the Hungarian separate peace negotiations. We kept hoping. After all, it seemed realistic that Hungary might follow Romania. We kept waiting. Nothing happened.

The new school year had already started but we could not be enrolled. Parents were worried. There was the rumor that before the total collapse even 15 year old schoolboys were to be taken to the front

Papa was coming and going quite openly. He behaved as though he were the Invisible Man. His disguise was perfect. His old man appearance was so convincing that on the bus even German officers gave their seats to him. Close acquaintances did not

recognize him. Sometimes for their own amusement, Papa and his friend Jenő would go to their customary cafe and Jenő would ask the waiter if he knew whatever had happened to Papa. The waiter, with tears in his eyes, reminisced about the wonderful but now executed Papa. It was quite hard for them not to laugh and to keep Papa's identity secret.

Mama had not changed her appearance at all. But after seven months underground, it was decided that she should be transformed. Jenő's sister, Mária L., was a famous actress. She could not understand the fuss. It was quite simple. Mama's hair color and style should be altered. This was not so easy. She had dark brown hair straight as nails. And she liked her looks. She would not herself dream of changing, but she had to accept the fact that she should not push her luck much further. Mária L. called her personal hairdresser and they discussed what should be done. An appointment was made for next day. I was allowed to accompany Mama. Happy and excited. I could hardly wait to witness Mama's metamorphosis. And, I was looking forward to meeting at least one movie star, since the hairdresser's clientele was exclusively from the entertainment world. We finally arrived. The hairdresser was expecting us. Mama did not have to give any instruction. Everything was done according to the pre-planned design. I patiently watched the transformation. The result was spectacular. Mama's hair was dyed dark red and had soft waves. She was more than beautiful, she was gorgeous. She was glad to see that her looks had been enhanced. She had to admit that after all she had been 'beautified'. At Jenő's they gathered around her and did not stop complimenting her new looks. It was too bad that other problems did not have such a simple solution.

On October 15 everyone's ear was glued to the radio. People were waiting for the Governor's announcement that Hungary will sign separate peace agreement. There was a speech, but as a result instead of peace the Hungarian fascists, the Arrow Cross took over power and the reign of terror began. The grownups felt helpless. They no longer knew what to do, where to hide. Providence did not abandon us. Next day Papa was making his routine tour downtown when he ran into his banker friend Turi.. He was at the time working for the International Red Cross. He was involved in saving children. It turned out that they had just established a new home in a patrician mansion in Castle Hill. When Turi heard our family's situation, he suggested that Mama, Andrew and I should move in right away. Papa rushed back to Jenő's with the good news. We left for Castle Hill the

same day. According to our papers, Mama was Mária Sz, my former governess, András was Iván Cz., Jenő's son., and I was Katalin Rápolthy, the little girl who never was.

The new home of the International Red Cross was on Cavalier Road. In the moment that we stepped inside I was impressed with the high ceilings, antique furniture, Persian carpets and naturally the patrician staircase. The majority of children had not arrived yet. A few grownups were wandering about. We were received by Baroness Erzsébet, the proprietor's niece. Mama officially became a Red Cross Nurse, András and I were placed in opposite wings, since the girls and the boys lived in different quarters. At this point we ceased to be a family and during our stay we hardly saw each another.

The house was staffed by the refugees. There were some who brought their own or a relative's child with them. There were Jews, half-Jews, quarter-Jews. Some had just found out that they were not Aryans. There were anti-German, anti-Nazi aristocrats, Transylvanian refugees and genuine war orphans too. It took a week for everybody to move in.

Originally the mansion had belonged to an Hungarian aristocrat. When the Germans invaded the Gestapo took him away. They were seeking his French Impressionist paintings. But he refused to turn them over. It was said that he died from his torture but had not revealed their hiding place. Anki, his Austrian born wife, rented the house to a French diplomat. When it was found out that the diplomat was an active participant in the anti-Nazi underground, the Gestapo came to arrest him but somehow he escaped. Anki then turned her house over to the International Red Cross with the understanding that she would stay on living there. Her niece, Erzsébet, was appointed Directress.

Because the mansion had had such a past the Gestapo was a daily visitor. The Germans showed up almost every afternoon. Needless to say, we were scared to death when we saw their car arrive and men in leather coats with swastika armbands entered the house. Always they searched the house, looking for the hidden paintings. As they were sniffing around they were also looking for the French diplomat. Somehow they were convinced that he would return. And, of course, they regularly inspected the children's

papers. Anki, the proprietress, as soon as she saw their car arriving put on her shabby coat and dirty nurse's veil. Then she grabbed her beaten up purse filled with the family jewelry. In the entrance hall, when she came face to face with the Germans, she brushed past them greeting them : "Gu-ten Ta-ge" with an incredible accent. The Germans shrugged their shoulder : "Ja , Sie ist eine Alte Schwester!" In case they asked for papers, she was well prepared. Her purse, with the family jewelry, was filled with junk and dirty handkerchiefs. The Germans found this so repelling that they never took the trouble to take a closer look. This was her luck. She was using the papers of a young woman. She bore no resemblance to the photo. So she poured ink on it and scratched out the date of birth. Mama often left before the Gestapo arrived. Once she had a very close call. They asked her mother's maiden name. Suddenly she went blank. She could not remember which Mária was she at the moment. She started to laugh. They thought that she was drunk and decided not to be bothered with her.

We were in constant danger from the Gestapo. Whenever there were too many children without proper papers, Erzsébet would put out the sign 'QUARANTINE'. It was true what they said about the Germans. They feared only contagious diseases. Seeing the sign they did not come around for a week. In the meantime, either the children were furnished with proper papers or some were sent elsewhere. Erzsébet. had her own home in Castle Hill. In order to prove her total confidence in the safety that the International Red Cross would provide, she moved in her own children with the refugees.

Not all the grownups had false papers. It was strange. Some knew who the others were but not everybody knew each other's true identity . I could never figure out how did this work. Mama took great pleasure in her new name, Mária. She had never liked her real name. As she was getting close to forty she thought it was ridiculous that people called her 'Pipi'. But Mama was totally unsuitable for the role of nurse. She could not give any medical emergency assistance to anyone and in general she could not stand children. As long as she did not have to perform her nursely duty she was satisfied and she did look fine in the uniform. Erzsébet immediately recognized Mama's real talent: interior decorator. Since there was a lot of arranging to do, this became her main activity... At night, the grownups gathered in the kitchen They were remembering the good old times. Mama shined with her literary connections. She got along with everybody and during

political discussions she kept her mouth shut. Sometimes she had a difficult time keeping quiet especially when the royalists were planning the future of Hungary. Incidentally, Erzsébet was the principal spokesman of this faction.

In the beginning this new way of life was strange for me. It had been a long time since I could stay in one place. For a bed, if I was lucky I slept on a sofa, more often in an armchair or a bathtub. I was also not the only little girl around. We were put in age groups but Erzsébet placed me with the "big girls". I was delighted. Intellectually I fitted in but in other matters I always had to prove myself...

I was intrigued by the mysterious past of the mansion and the surrounding park. During the Turkish occupation of Buda another house used to stand in the place of the present one. I hoped to make some archaeological find. I thought that perhaps after all the Germans were right. There must be a secret hiding place for the paintings. I was searching non-stop. I carefully examined all the wood work in the Library. I was hoping that just as in an American movie there is a hidden revolving door. But no luck. Then day when the Gestapo arrived I was upstairs. They were making more noise than usual. There was a great deal of shouting. I thought that if this is really a roundup they do not know that I am upstairs alone. This is my chance to hide. I went to the wardrobe next to our bathroom. As I was looking inside I noticed that the silk wallpaper had a strange outline. It turned out to be a secret door. I opened it and found myself on top of a serpentine staircase. I went down. There were the remains of a Turkish bath. I had just come across the remaining Turkish part of the house. I looked around but saw there were no hidden treasures. For a few days I kept my discovery secret. At last I revealed it to Erzsébet. It turned out that her uncle knew something about it but the house plans were destroyed in a fire. Afterwards he never made further inquiries. Erzsébet was pleased with my discovery and I was glad that I could prove her that she made the right choice placing me with the "big girls".

LOVE AND DEATH

I found a girlfriend, Zita. She was one of the 'big girls'. Zita was a sixteen year old countess. She used to live on her family's country estate. With the proximity of the approaching Soviet Army her parents were concerned about their daughter's safety. They

brought her to the International Red Cross hoping that she would be safe there. .Our friendship came about through diabolo. We were both equally talented in this sport. The others were neither skilled nor interested. At first, Zita and I were simply diabolo companions. But then we also took long walks together in the park. One day, as we were walking, Zita began to talk about her fiance Géza. She showed me her ring and even read me extracts from his love letters to her. I was attentive to each word she said. I felt that I had become her confidant. From the moment that she opened up her heart to me, she spoke of nothing else but her love. It was a beautiful love story befitting a fairy tale. Zita was often sad. She had had no news from Géza. I tried to console her, in my own way. I told her that soon the war would be over and she would be again in her beloved fiance's arms. I assured her with utmost conviction. I had to be convinced that all this would come to pass. I had to believe in love stories with happy endings. I refused to accept that in those days there were only bad endings. Most of the time I managed to cheer up Zita and she would be dreaming again about her happiness with Géza. On a Sunday her parents came to visit. Unfortunately, when they have saw the multitude of refugees, they no longer thought that the International Red Cross would be a safe place for their daughter. They immediately took Zita back to the country estate.

I missed Zita very much. I played diabolo by myself. I walked alone in the park. I was thinking about Zita and Géza. I was daydreaming about their wedding. Naturally I was there. I was the flower girl, dressed just as we already had planned. Unfortunately it had to remain only a dream. Just a little later Zita was killed in an air raid. I could not stop thinking about Géza. "Is he still alive?"- I asked myself. "And how will he learn Zita's death?" I wished I could have been with him . I felt like it was my role to tell him how much he was beloved...

Beside the Gestapo we have seen very few men. The ones we did see were lovers, fiances and husbands in search of a temporary hiding place. This is the way that Lőrinc an author whose works Papa published- came to stay. His wife, Frici, worked as a cook. She was Jewish. Lőrinc was not but he was of Russian descent. I had already met the author before. He was a mad genius who wrote incredibly long novels. Papa told me about his writing habits. He dictated his novels while in bed. He was naked, and most of the time he was covered with a blanket and would eat raw meat. The typists who took his dictation sometimes ended up as his mistresses. I watched him writing now. There was no raw

meat for him, true enough Frici tried her best to get some. There were no typists either. Poor Lőrinc was forced to type his novels fully dressed at the edge of the kitchen table all by himself. I have never seen such a couple before. Frici was so loving and servile that she even tried to guess her husband's wishes. The husband never took any notice of her. She might as well not have been there. I could not understand such unequal love. I hoped that it had not always been like this. I heard that Frici had been pretty when they first met. She was one of his typists who took dictation Now she was aging badly and she had become quite ugly. Lőrinc was still handsome and could always find a pretty young typist.

Among all the make-believe nurses there was a genuine one, Mária H. What is more she did not have any reason for being in hiding. She was an Aryan. She was a pretty charming woman who had been working for the International Red Cross for quite a long time. She was beloved by everyone. She had been never married but she did have a fiance, Pista. When the Jewish Laws were established Pista was drafted and put in the white armband category⁶. This was due to the fact that his adoptive father was half Jewish. Later on he found out that his adoptive father had not been his real father. His real father was Aryan. After this had been well documented he no longer had to wear the white armband but for some sentimental reason he kept it. By the time his army unit reached Budapest, the Russians were not far away. Pista came to stay with Mária. He put on civilian clothes and became the gardener. He had pretty good false papers, but, just in case, whenever the Gestapo visited he went into hiding.

One day Pista was working in the garden. He was so absorbed that he did not notice the Gestapo's arrival. When suddenly he saw the Germans, he panicked. He started to run. The Germans yelled: "Halt! Halt." He did not stop but just kept running. They shot at him. He was hit. He collapsed. Pista did not die. He was still alive. The Gestapo put him in the car. The Germans searched the gardener's room. They found the white armband and threatened us and promised a purge. To our surprise they then left. The panic was general. Everybody whose papers were not in order departed. They tried to

⁶ Non-Aryan draftees had to wear special armbands, white or yellow, and were assigned special tasks accordingly.

convince Mária H. to leave. She refused. She felt she had to stay because if the Gestapo does not find her on the premisses, hostages would be taken.

We were readying ourselves for the return of the Gestapo. It was decided that the aristocrats and the Transylvanian refugees should stand in front of those who had any Jewish blood. I guess, this was the best we could do. In less than an hour the Germans were back. They did not ask for anyone's papers. But they did single out Mária H. She stepped forward. They grabbed her with utmost brutality They shoved, pushed and kicked her forward as she was taken to the car. We watched it all in horror. We never saw Mária again. Under torture, before he died, Pista had given up Mária's name. The Gestapo wanted through her to find out what was really going on in the International Red Cross Mansion on Cavaliers Road. Mária was tortured for many days, but she did not surrender a single name. In the end they executed her.

ADESTE FIDELES...

It was already December. Everybody was waiting. We waited for Christmas to come We waited for the war to end. The Gestapo was still paying daily visits to us. By now we had gotten used to it. There were rumors. In town the Hungarian Arrow Cross men were committing dramatically crueller atrocities than the Germans. We did not witness any of this. We were living our peaceful, relatively sheltered lives behind the doors of Cavalier Road. We were no longer thinking about what was happening beyond our enclosed world.

Finally we had to face hideous reality. A three year old boy was brought in. With his hair golden blond and his eyes large and blue, he reminded me at first of an angel. But the look on his face reflected a horrible terror. I had never seen such a look. The first time I saw this little boy with no name, he was sitting on the floor. He was staring into the void in front of him, quite silent, and motionless. Then he began to bang his head against the wall. He kept doing it. He would not stop. The sight was very distressing. I could not imagine what must have happened to him, what had he seen, what had driven him into

this state. We learned very shortly what had happened to him. He was a little Jewish child, whose parents, along with so many others, were taken down to the Danube to be shot by the Arrow Cross men. Somehow his parents had managed to hide him in a doorway. Representatives of the International Red Cross were constantly looking for hidden Jewish children and so they had come upon this little boy. Not only would he not speak but he would not eat either. I wanted to communicate with him. I approached him as I was dealing with an abused dog. I did not get anywhere. He had totally shut out the outside world. He just sat and stared, occasionally banging his head against the wall. One night, when everybody was asleep, he sneaked into the kitchen. He stole some cake and hiding in a closet he ate it. Then all over again he would bang his head against the wall. The little boy became a constant reminder of the sufferings of Jewish children. The grownups were much shaken and they began to worry that he would be noticed by the Gestapo. For the sake of the safety of the others he was taken to another location.

Once the little boy without a name was gone none of us children ever spoke of him. A kind of calm had returned. The girls could once again be carried away by Christmas fever. The big ones were teaching the little ones how to make Christmas decorations. We, the little ones, were busy throughout the day making stars and snowflakes from tissue paper. Nobody wished for earthly gifts. We simply prayed for the ending of the horrors.

The grownups, each in her way, were also readying for Christmas. Mama was busy most of the time rearranging the contents of the house. In the kitchen the women were baking day and night. Naturally every one claimed, that her recipe, her cake, was the very best. But when the little boy without a name took a piece of cake from the kitchen, it happened to be Mama's masterpiece. She was very proud of that cake. She talked about it and did not let people forget that her cake had been the chosen one, indisputable proof of its excellence. No one now dared to contest her outstanding culinary talent. Mama had another passion. She loved to buy nice things at good prices and also she loved to give gifts. She heard about sales downtown, especially at one favored store, specializing in fabulous amber. She could not resist. She had to go. She decided to buy spectacular gifts for everyone. For several days, right after lunch she walked down from Castle Hill, crossed the Chain Bridge and presto she was in her world of shopping. She did not think

that perhaps at that very moment the Arrow Cross men were shooting the Jews on the Danube, that they might blow up the Bridge, that she might be killed or separated from us, even that she might be arrested. She must shop. All the while I worried. Every night I thought that perhaps by the end of the war I shall become a war orphan for real. Most of the time Mama returned very late but she always did return. And ended up with many gifts, even a few extra.

Finally it was Holy Night. The Christmas tree was spectacular in the large room. The glass ornaments were glittering and our handmade stars and snowflakes did not put us to shame. Under the tree the floor was covered with gifts. The well dressed children were ready to celebrate. It gave all the appearance of a genuine Christmas. We were just about starting to sing *Adeste fideles*, when suddenly the house was shaken by a gigantic explosion. The force from the blast ripped open the front door. Three nuns were there standing at the entrance. Despite the sudden interruption, we continued our singing and the nuns joined in.

Without any doubt the siege had begun. The significance of the gifts diminished a bit, though everyone clung fast to what they had received. There was neither panic nor chaos. The grownups already had made plans for this too. First, everyone had to move to the basement. Surprisingly fast, the necessary cots were set up and each of us had a designated place. As soon as we had opened all our gifts it was time for dinner. There was no shortage of Christmas treats. We found out almost immediately that there was not going to be a food shortage soon but that we would not have sufficient drinking water. The ham was very salty and already by the second day water had to be rationed. The snow saved us. Unfortunately some were so thirsty that they could not wait until it had been purified and they became very sick. There was a lot of talk about diseases and epidemics. In particular, there was talk of typhoid. I was amazed. I thought it could be caught only at the front... Now, I realized, I was living at the front. The nuns stayed for only a few days. They helped but mainly they prayed. We were all saying rosaries day and night.

By now we were all living in the basement. News did come to us. Most of it was bad. The news of Turi's infant son's death was the most tragic. During an air raid their

shelter had caved in. His wife Eva was buried alive with her son, little András, in her arms. By the time that they were both unearthed the infant had died. Ever since the deportation I tried to understand the ways of Providence. I was unable to grasp how was it possible that it had been the God-fearing meek Jews who were killed first. And now I could not understand how it could be that Turi, who had saved the lives of so many children, had to lose his own infant son. I could not help wondering: Why had I been spared?

András left the basement often. He went upstairs and outdoors. He liked scouting about. On one occasion in the middle of heavy crossfire the Germans took hold of him. They did not ask for his papers. They could not care less about such matters now. They wanted only some camouflage for their large guns. He was accordingly sent up to the top of a tree to gather branches for this purpose. As he climbed, explosive shells were flying back and forth quite near him. Andrew was very shaken by this experience and for some time he dared not go upstairs. But I started to think that it was quite safe for me to go upstairs. I could not imagine that the Germans could be so cruel or stupid that in a crossfire they would send a little girl up a tree. So I ventured out of the basement but remained inside the house. Bullets were flying, explosions non-stop. It seemed that I was in the middle of a battlefield. On one occasion a mortar shell whizzed by my ear. I lodged in the wall, but did not explode. Needless to say, for the time being, I too gave up my outings.

It became obvious that the mansion on Cavalier Road was a dangerous place to be. Erzsébet found a safer shelter for us on Castle Hill and she decided to move everybody there. Preparations for the exodus began. Mama and András had decided that under no circumstances would we move into a cellar on Castle Hill. Fortunately, they found a man who was willing to take a message to our pediatrician Emil. In a few hours the man returned with the reply. We were more than welcomed in Emil's villa on Rabbit Street.. We gathered our belongings and left.

In peace time it would have been a good half hour walk from Cavalier Road to Rabbit Street. Now it was anything but leisurely. András was our leader and commander-in-chief. He planned our route and gave the orders when we were supposed to go and

when to stop, when to walk and when to run, even when we were supposed to lie down and crawl. But no matter how much he yelled at Mama, she was incapable of following the simplest instruction. Either she was doing absolutely nothing or she was doing the opposite... Somehow we reached Széll Kálmán Square.⁷

Széll Kálmán Square had now become a battlefield. Everywhere, burned out tramway cars, buses, automobiles. The Gomba Cafe was also burned out. A few corpses lying about. Bullets were flying, guns were roaring. It seemed unlikely that all three of us would make it alive to the other side of the square. András regained his composure. He was surprisingly calm. Once more he explained to Mama that when she hears the coming of a bullet she should lie down. When she hears the explosion it will be too late to lie down. This was no longer a joking matter, it was a question of life or death. We waited a little bit. It seemed that the shooting had quieted. Then we started our crossing. Mama didn't follow András' instruction even once. She never laid down when she was supposed to do so. She always waited till she heard the explosion. Even then she would not lie on her belly. Rather she took on the pose of Madame Recamier in the David painting. Looking at András' frustrated and angry demeanor, and discovering Mama's sudden likeness to Madame Recamier, I was afraid no more. I was no longer a participant in the life threatening crossing of Szell Kalman Square, I was watching a comedy.

At last we arrived safe and sound on the other side of the square.

LOVE TRIANGLE IN RABBIT STREET

After crossing Széll Kálmán Square the rest of the journey seemed almost small excursion. Shortly we arrived at Rabbit Street.

Emil's villa was quite large, three stories high with several occupants. When we entered we were taken aback. There was no visible sign of the ongoing siege. Our pediatrician, Emil, his physician wife, Lenke, and their eight year old daughter. Marika, occupied the first floor. Only when there had been heavy shelling and bombing had they

⁷ Presently Moscow Square (Moszkva tér)

go down to the cellar. On the other hand, all the tenants on the upper floors had permanently left their apartments and had moved into the shelter. Before we settled in we were taken to the shelter and introduced to its occupants, Each of them had his own particular hobby to pursue in these circumstances. For example, there was an elderly gentleman who was reading cook books day and night. Everyday he would read aloud not only the menus of famous luncheons, providing his own running commentaries, but also he would provide the recipe for each dish. His wife was constantly manicuring her nails and changed the color of her nail polish at least several times a week.

While this absurd play took place below, life above was not dull either. Lenke was suffering a severe case of nostalgia. She was trying her best to revive the good old times, especially her honeymoon in Venice. Whenever she came to be possessed completely by the memory of Venice she simply could no longer stay put. She rushed to her hairdresser, who happened to live near by, ordered her hair died black and had a mini facial. Her eyebrows would be re-styled in the manner of movie stars from the thirties. But when she returned, she was neither beautified nor rejuvenated. As a matter of fact, she looked worse, now altogether like a scarecrow.

On the other hand, Emil was blossoming. He was constantly coming and going, making house calls to his patients and he didn't limit his visits to children, but would attend to everyone who required any sort of medical help, hoping only to be out of reach for women on the verge of giving birth. Just a few blocks away from us, at the Funicular, the Germans would not give up the fight. The scene had become a front. There were many wounded men. For these specific labors, Emil had been fortunate enough to have acquired an excellent assistant, Livia, the army nurse, who had great field experience in removing bullets

Livia was a 26 year old, pretty, charming, kind and pleasant young woman. She came from a distinguished family and was quite cultured. She turned up in Rabbit Street by sheer accident. She was on a two day Christmas furlough from the army and had come home to visit some friends. The siege of Budapest started and she was unable to go back to her unit. For us little girls, Livia was the personification of the divine young woman. Marika and I admired continuously and there was almost a rivalry between us for Livia's

attention. We hung on every word she uttered. She told of her life before the War, the vacations abroad, the fabulous balls, and the countless young men who had fallen madly in love with her. With the war, their number increased. They were mostly journalists, doctors and wounded soldiers, who now replaced the young men of the balls of the earlier years.

I spent most of my time with Marika. She somewhat envied me because I was a year older and I was not fat. But for the adults I was regarded and treated as "the little girl of no importance". András had graduated to a new level of significance. Being fifteen years old, he shared the danger of his male contemporaries, to be called up for frontline battle. He now could easily be assumed to be a military deserter. For another reason, he enjoyed considerable popularity. From the constant explosions the window panes were always being shattered. They had all to be replaced by newspapers. András became the skillful master at this task. He assiduously applied himself to the gratitude of everyone in the house. Meanwhile, Marika had madly fallen in love with him. András did not pay much attention to the little girl. However, when as a token of her love, she gave him her sweets, he willingly accepted them.

Now even at night we did not go down to the shelter. I refused to sleep in my clothes, but learned to be dressed in a minute. We became accustomed to gathering up snow, melting and boiling it. The lack of electricity no longer seemed a problem. The shelling and the bombing too had become part of our daily life. There was only one thing that kept taking unexpected turns: Lenke's jealousy.

It became evident that Marika and I were not the only admirers of Livia. Emil definitely had an eye for her. We, the little girls, did not find anything objectionable in this. We thought it quite natural. How could any man resist Livia's divine charms? We saw no harm in this because we thought it impossible that a beautiful twenty-six year old woman would reciprocate the amorous advances of a fat baldish 40 year old man. Lenke had a different view. Her jealousy increased every day. The facts that she herself was five years older than her husband and that she was far from being beautiful, did not help much. At first she made only remarks. Later on she made scenes. Sometimes at night we were unexpectedly awakened by Lenke's entering our room. Her died black hair had been

loosened. Wearing only a white laced nightgown and holding a candle in her hand she announced that she was searching out her husband. With all her remarks and scenes, Lenke finally realized one day that she was effecting nothing. She had to change her strategy. So at the start of the day she said to all that at night we were to have a real dinner and that an invitation was being extended to Livia. Departing from the house in a hurry, we thought that she came upon a new source of food and anticipated the delicious dinner to come. Lenke returned in the late afternoon. She looked terrible. We could tell that she had been to see her hairdresser and esthetician again. She set about arranging the table with the finest tablecloth, china, crystal and silverware. At the proper time, we were all seated at the table waiting for the festive dinner to be served. At last Lenke appeared, adorned with her best jewelry and wearing a dark green evening gown. She carried a large soup dish. She placed it on the table and put on a recording of the Merry Widow. We were stunned. Speechless, we began to eat what was only dry bean soup. We hadn't finished eating when Lenke suddenly jumped up, threw herself on Emil and passionately began to kiss him all over. When her husband did not show any sign of interest Lenke became hysterical. "Why? Oh why can't you love me as you did in Venice?"- she cried out, repeating it over and over again. Then, her sobbing stopped, she got off Emil's knees and wanted to dance. At this point, Emil simply left the room. He returned shortly with a syringe in his hand filled with tranquilizer. He administered it to his wife and that was that.

No one said a word. I went to sleep with the thought that now Livia will take pity on Emil and after all they will have an affair if it hadn't happened already.

THE RUSSIAN TEACHER

In Rabbit Street we formed a little community. Each member had his or her position and duty. András glued newspapers onto the windows, Emil and Livia went off to the front, Lenke took immaculate care of the apartment, Marika and I played a lot. And Mama cultivated her cultural rapport with those who were worthy to her attention.

We would have lived quite peacefully if the cigarette shortage had not caused daily conflict between Mama and András. Already on the second day of the siege Andrew had confiscated all of Mama's jewelry. He feared that we would die of hunger because eventually she would have to trade it for cigarettes. Naturally I was scared stiff. I thought that in the end Mama would have no other choice. She will behave just like the Gypsy Woman. I would have rather suffered hunger than have a loose woman for a mother. I do not know exactly how, I did not dare ask but she always managed to have cigarettes.

Day after day the fighting was becoming more serious. The Russians were moving forward house by house. Sometimes the possession of a house might go back and forth, changing from one hour to another. The fighting had not reached our street yet but everybody was very anxious. They spoke German but nobody knew any Russian."How are we going to talk to the Russians? How are we going to understand them?"-wondered the occupants of Rabbit Street. Mama already talked a great deal about the Russians. With the greatest enthusiasm she drew upon everything she had read in Russian novels. She also spoke about the equality, courage and daring of Soviet women. She always had the greatest admiration for working Soviet women who supposedly in their free time liked to parachute jump. It was never exactly clear where did she had read this. She also spoke about the samovar and the Russian ritual of drinking tea. In a word. Mama had become the Russian Expert in Residence. When the knowledge of Russian civilization did not prove to be sufficient for the calming of nerves, learning the language seemed to be the only appropriate remedy.

So, from that part of her character that sought to be helpful toward others in distress. Mama made a revelation. As a matter of fact, she had studied Russian and she would be more than happy to give lessons. The sense of joy was palpable. Everyone was going to learn Russian from Mama. By the time the Russians reach our house everyone will have sufficient knowledge to converse with the occupying forces. There was Russian language fever. Everyone was studying, i.e. all except us, the little girls. We were told that we did not need to know such things. The students were happy with their new knowledge. Mama, the Russian teacher, took great pride that bcause of her knowledge she had eased the anxiety of others. This continued for a while until one day a student remarked, that Russian is not as difficult as he imagined. A matter of fact it reminded him

very much of Italian. Then another student made exactly the same remark. I was delighted to hear this. Since I knew a little Italian, I thought: "How wonderful! How marvelous! I will be able to understand the Russian soldiers without ever having studied with Mama." Now I wanted to know more. I asked them for examples of the Russian they had learned. I could not believe my ears. Most of it was Italian. I cried out in my surprise: "Mama, you taught them Italian!" Mama, for a moment, looked somewhat embarrassed.. Then she lit a cigarette and cavalierly remarked: "Oh, now I understand why the teaching came to me with such ease. I thought I was just warming up. To tell you the truth, I was quite amazed, because I hardly know any Russian at all..."

Nobody raised a voice to complain. In some peculiar way they were all grateful that for at least for a few days they had been put at ease...

CHAMPAGNE AND BEETHOVEN

The nearby street fighting had been going on for more than a week. Time by time the Germans showed up in the house. They were surrounded. We were no longer worried about our papers. Some times they simply looked around to be sure that there were no Russians present. However we feared them all the same. We feared that they dig themselves in and make their last stand here, in this house. These German soldiers were quite different from the ones who had until recently represented the 'victorious' Third Reich. They were very young, most barely twenty years old. They were exhausted. They were not arrogant at all. They were visibly numb. They were all resigned to their fate. They knew that the war was lost and there was very little chance that they would survive.

We impatiently waited for that day when the last German soldier would vanish forever from our sight. One day five young Germans came into the house. They pointed their guns at us and forced everyone to go down into the cellar. We were terrified. We thought that perhaps they were preparing to execute us. We listened. It was quiet upstairs. Then we heard some noise. It seemed they were in the entrance hall. Then there was silence again. We went upstairs to Emil's apartment. The drawers had been all pulled out.

From the traces we could see that the soldiers had shaved, washed up and changed their shirts and underwear. We began to think that they have left us forever.

Emil had some champagne stashed away. It had been decided a long time ago that when the last German leaves we would drink the champagne. Antique crystal glasses were now taken from the cabinet, the champagne poured out and a recording of the Marseillaise played. We all sang together. Even we, the little girls, clinked our glasses. Then someone arrived with news, out of breath and very frightened. It seemed that the Germans were coming back to the house again. We stopped the music immediately and hurried back to the cellar. We waited. We were waiting in terror. It was not long ago that we heard that the Germans had executed a couple because they were caught listening to the Marseillaise. But they would not have heard us, or perhaps they did not care any longer.

The next day the same Germans came back. Again they chased us down to the cellar. This time it was quite different. There was no longer such silence above. They were playing Beethoven's music quite loudly. One recording after the other for more than an hour. Pause. Then one burst of machine-gun fire. We thought this must be a firing squad. Somehow I was expecting it to be our turn next. I wanted to become invisible. We did not dare go upstairs. We did not dare to make a move. We were waiting for something to happen. We did not have to wait for long. The firing began again. Pause. Then shouting in a language that we could not understand. The shelter door was kicked in and a small group of Russian soldiers with machine-guns appeared. This was the way that I saw the first Russian soldiers in my life.

We were to discover that we were in great trouble. Not only were they looking for German soldiers but they were extremely furious. In the entrance hall all the wine barrels had been shot full of holes. The machine-gun fire that we had heard was not a firing squad. The Germans did not execute anybody. They had shot into the barrels. The red wine was pouring out through the bullet holes. We were ordered upstairs. They pointed their machine-gun at us. They threatened us one by one. They wanted to know who was responsible for sabotaging the wine... Luckily for us, a colonel came along and told his men to move along.

I entered Emil's apartment. I could see that the Germans again had changed their shirts. On the table there were two empty champagne bottles and a few crystal glasses. The five German soldiers had been all killed by the same Russians who had barged into the cellar. In such combat no one bothered to take prisoners.

It was a very strange feeling to know the details of the last hours of the lives of these last German soldiers who came to Emil's house.

TEA ANYONE?

Now we had less to fear from the Germans But there still was uncertainty. The war was not over yet. All around us the street fighting continued. We were scared of the Russians but at the same time afraid that the Germans might be coming back.

Mama received the Russians according to her convictions. When she noticed that they were taking everyone's wristwatch away, she gave up her Cartier before being asked. When a Russian major noticed this, he took the watch back from the soldier and returned it to Mama. With awkward gestures he explained to her that she should not be wearing it. In no time at all the first soldier returned and demanded the watch.

Mama tried to become an interpreter. After all she did know a few words of Russian. She had learned her lesson. No longer did she mix it with Italian. But now she remembered a few words in Czech that she heard as a child. So she started to combine all these words and she also invented quite a few. The Russians thought that she was speaking some Slavic language unknown to them. In this way Mama was to become the Russian Interpreter of the villa and for the entire neighborhood. Since she was waiting for the Russians whom she had known so well from novels, she received them accordingly. At first she offered her guests tea. This simply enraged them. She could not understand why they were they demanding vodka instead.

When at last we had been allowed to move about upstairs Mama made another discovery regarding the Russians' drinking habits. When we entered the apartment she

was shocked to see a young soldier drinking her Chanel. She was amazed that he preferred it to her tea and at the same time upset that the largest size Chanel perfume bottle that one could buy was disappearing. She had been counting on it lasting till Chanel would again be sold in Budapest.

Many drunken soldiers were coming and going. The men were scared that they are going to be taken away. The women were terrified of being raped. They tried to make themselves as unattractive as possible. Each woman tried to disguise herself in her own way. Now, what I learned from Pistike regarding rape became handy. In my own way I tried to enlighten Marika. Thank God for this knowledge! We had to rely on each another because nobody was paying any attention to us. We were also told that we are not at any risk, and by the way nobody would have the desire of raping us. We were afraid just the same. We had never seen such drunken men before. I remembered Pistike's last words: "Who is going to protect you?" He had good reason for his concern, because now I realized that nobody was protecting me and I had to look out for myself. But since I was just a little girl, perhaps the grownups were right. I would be ignored. I was in no real danger. Then, just as I began to feel quite safe, when a staggering drunken Russian grabbed me. I thought I was to die in that very moment. Fortunately a sober one came along and freed me from the first one's grasp. I was saved. When afterwards I tried to tell Mama what had happened to me, she dismissively told me that I was a troublemaker and with all my 'stories' I wanted to be the center of attention.

Not all the Russians represented danger. There were those who brought bread and distributed food. Mama kept busy as the Russian Interpreter and she even received cigarettes. Unfortunately they were not Egyptian. There was an officer who came around with regularity and came to be on friendly terms with the 'Russian interpreter'. Day by day the front was receding.

One day the Russians announced a celebration. The officer acquaintance extended his personal invitation to Mama. He wanted her to come as his interpreter. To the other young women, he gave the order to come because they needed dance partners. It was no joking matter. The women had no choice. They had to go. Marika and I laid low. We were happy that we had not been invited to the party. It appeared that Mama

was going willingly and that the other women were following her as sacrificial lambs. The next morning they all looked weather beaten. Some had torn dresses. Nobody spoke about the party. In spite of the fact that I was just a little girl I understood quite well. Whatever happened at this party, it is forbidden forever to speak about it.

CROSSING THE DANUBE

There were many kinds of Russian soldiers. It became a game for us to guess who has seen which kinds of them and which type we are going to see next. It was impossible to tell ahead if the next one will be a Russian, a Tatar, a Mongolian, a wild one, a drunk one, whether the military police will show up. In the end our liberation turned out to be a dangerous affair.

One afternoon some frightened strangers barged into Emil's. They told us to come out into the street immediately because a new unknown military unit would be soon on the scene. Soldiers in such uniforms had not been seen before and they were something to behold. We went outside. We could not see a thing. We were told to be patient. From the other end of our street their emissaries would be approaching. Suddenly we spotted one strangely dressed man. He was wearing a dark brown camel hair coat. A rope was tied around his waist. He had a red armband and a fur hat. His big mustache was covered with snow. We looked. We were amazed. I was stunned. The strange unknown kind of soldier was none other than Papa. Immediately I ran and jumped up to his neck I kissed him all over. At last I felt that I was really saved and liberated.

We went inside. A million questions to ask. How had he managed to come all the way from Pest on foot? What is the meaning of his outfit? How did he survive the siege? Before answering any questions, he took off his 'uniform' and changed into dry 'civilian' clothes. Emil still had something to drink for the occasion. Papa drank a shot of plum brandy and then began his narration.

Since the Russians were coming from the East, Szervita Square had been liberated from the Germans much earlier. From the first day on Papa started planning his journey to

Rabbit Street. He knew that we were still under German occupation, so he had to wait. He waited impatiently. Then he heard the news. The front had collapsed. The Soviet Army occupied Buda with the exception of Castle Hill, the last remaining stronghold of the German Army. It was not easy then to come from Pest to Buda. All the bridges had been blown up. "How could I go across"- Papa kept wondering. Though there were no longer any bridges, the Danube was frozen. He had no other choice. He was going to walk across the frozen river. No longer did he have to fear the Germans' identification control, but, now the Russians were asking people for papers. And they did take some away. Papa, with the help of Jenő, invented a character. Together they designed the appropriate costume. This imaginary character had to give such an impression that the Russians would respect him and the Hungarian civilians would fear him. They agreed that because of the general chaos, the more absurd the costume, the more credible it will be. In this way the "Little Father Soviet Commissar" was born. Before Papa set out on his Grand Tour the inhabitants of Szervita Square had to inspect his appearance. After a careful analysis, they pronounced it impressive and convincing. With a slab of bacon and a piece of bread in his pocket, Papa set out on his journey. He reached the Danube. The ice had already been melting but he tried to cross nonetheless. He was not far out when he fell in the river. Managing to make his way back he was lucky to be alive. Physically exhausted from his exertions, his wet clothes half frozen already, he should have recouped his forces days later. Instead, the very next morning he set out again. This time he went north up the Danube to a point opposite Óbuda where the river was almost totally frozen. This time his crossing was successful. And now here he was ready to take us back to Pest, but since the ice is melting everywhere we had to leave early the next morning. I could not sleep. I was very excited. In school I learned that in the fifteenth century Mátyás was declared King by the people who were standing on the ice of the Danube. Even in my wildest dreams I would have never imagined that one day I should cross the frozen Danube. The next morning we gathered our things. We put them all on the sled that Marika donated. We were given some food and water for our long journey. In spite of the warnings of dangers involved in this undertaking, nothing could change Papa's mind. He wanted to take his family back to Pest.

Only when I stepped outside of the house did I realize that not since we crossed Széll Kálmán Square had I been able to see what had been my neighborhood. I was

surprised by all the ruins. We started to walk down Rabbit Street. Soon we reached Penny Street. As we turned around the corner I came upon a very sad sight. On the snow-covered road a dead horse and a little fox terrier were lying side by side. I started to sob. "What does this horse and little dog have to do with the war?" Nobody answered. We kept going ahead in silence. After a while Papa tried to console me. He told me that the horse and the dog had been good friends. In war, when friends die together side by side, it is always a nice death... This made me think about the friendship of the two but I could not find any solace. We kept going ahead in the direction of Óbuda. Everywhere we looked, houses in ruins and burned out automobiles.

We were in Óbuda when we came across a Russian patrol. They had made a road block and were checking everybody's papers. It was a very slow process and already quite a few people were waiting to receive permission to continue their journey. While waiting our turn we watched the others. There was a man ahead of us with an odd large suitcase who looked very suspicious. I wondered what he could have been carrying in it. I did not have to wait long. Soon it was his turn. The suitcase was full of knives. The Russians detained him. Now it was our turn. We were only concerned about András. He was in a dangerous position. He could have been easily taken for a Hungarian deserter. Our papers also could have become suspicious. All four of us had different names. The Russians kept examining our papers. They kept studying our faces, then they signaled that we are allowed to go on our way. I doubt that they could read our papers. Probably studying our faces they recognized some family resemblance.

We had to go somewhat further in order to reach our crossover point. It was quite noticeable that the ice had started to melt. We could see that in the far distance here and there people were successfully crossing the Danube. Mama more or less expressed her concern. András expressed his displeasure. I had all my confidence in Papa, so I did not pay any attention to them. Before starting Papa gave us some instructions. For example, what to do if the ice starts to crack or if it separates into blocks. We started our crossing. It was quite unnerving. Sometimes we could hear the breaking sound of the ice beneath our feet. But we could also see people crossing nearby. We were close to the shores of Pest when we noticed that at the edge of the floe there was still the Danube. So we had to jump from the ice over the water in order to reach the shore. How to manage the sled?

András was the first to have made the jump. Papa then threw him the rope of the sled. The sled slipped into the water and András pulled it to shore. Now it was Mama's turn. Never willing to follow any instructions, she would make no exception for this occasion. After a long discussion, András had had it with her. "Why all this fuss? The water is not so deep. Let her fall in, I'll pull her out the same way I pulled out the sled." When she heard this, Mama suddenly jumped like a deer and landed on the shore safe and sound.

We still had a long trip ahead of us. Downtown was quite far away still. Papa kept up his optimism. Mama did not say much. András was cursing everything. I started to become very cold. My shoes were soaked wet from the ice.

REQUIEM: DEATH OF A LITTLE GIRL

After many hours, the larger part of our journey was over. We were almost at Margit Bridge when András declared that he was no longer willing to go with us. He was hungry and tired. He had had enough. He was fed up with us and the war. He had decided to stay with Uncle Jozsi, Papa's uncle, who lived nearby, behind Vígsház.⁸ Strangely enough no one objected. There was no discussion. András left with a simple good-bye.

As far as we could see on Szent István Ring, there were burned out tramways. We continued on Falk Miksa Street. I started to think about old friends who used to live in this neighborhood. I wondered what happened to Borika and her Armenian painter husband Leo. And the ever gay Márta, Bobi's wife. Whatever happened to them? How did they manage the siege? But we could not stop anywhere. We had to keep going ahead. By now I was no longer walking. I was dragging myself. I was not only tired and hungry but I was also very cold. I thought I might freeze to death.

Finally we arrived to Lánchíd.⁹ Once upon a time this had been the border of Mimikoko's realm, the Belváros.¹⁰ The destruction had been total. Blown up bridges on

⁸ Famous theater in Budapest.

⁹ Chain Bridge.

¹⁰ Belváros.

the Danube, burned out hotels along the quays. In Dorottya Street, more houses in ruins, burned out automobiles, dead people and animals strewn about.

We made a small detour towards Nádor Square. We passed in front of Little Gerbeaud.¹¹ Broken store windows, sacked empty shelves. A year ago I used to come to this pastry shop. Now it seemed that it was only a long gone dream. ..I could see the elegant gentle ladies. Where had they gone? The situation at Big Gerbeaud was no better. I was now standing on Vörösmarty Square. There were ruins in every direction I looked. The Vigadó¹² was also burned out. I had never even been inside it. Children were not taken to such places. I always had had it in my mind that as soon as I would be grown up I would attend a ball and a concert there. Across the square not much was left of the Cunard Luxury Liner's Office. How many times had I pestered my governess to stop in front of it! I had always been mesmerized by the window displays showing posters and photos of their famous cruises. As I was standing in front of the window. I had been always dreaming the same dream: there was peace again and I could envision myself in an elegant black evening gown on the deck of a liner... Dreams vanished, illusions shattered...

I looked in the direction of Váci Street. Suddenly my eyes stopped roving. Ahead of us, I saw a mountain of German corpses towering toward the sky. The dark colors of the feared German uniforms stood in contrast to the whiteness of the snow. We reached the piled up corpses. I stopped. I could now look at the faces of the frozen German soldiers. I was numb. I did not feel a thing. I did not at all think that with these deaths any retribution had been achieved. They were all very young, hardly twenty. They were not the SS thugs or the men of the Gestapo that I had seen.. For me it was only their uniforms that stood for evil. I always believed that evil would not win out over the good. And I knew that our nightmare would somehow, sometime, end. But I never thought that it would come at the senseless sacrifice of German youth, that they had been destined to be the final victims...

¹¹ Well known pastry shop-cafe-tea room.

¹² Cultural and entertainment complex.

There were many Russian soldiers on Kristóf Square. They were very loud. Most of them were drunk. Some had just looted a music store and they were trying to play on the different instruments. Dancing and singing. They themselves were no older than the dead Germans behind me. They had come from far away, from very far away to liberate us.. They were our liberators but they were also the victors. And victory guarantees certain rights...

Between Vörösmarty Square and Kristóf Square I came to realize that the world of Mimikoko had been destroyed forever and that there would no longer be a place for her in the new order of things. Mimikoko herself had to die as well. It was not by accident that Kristóf Square had become her final resting place. After all, Tade, the Polish boy who had given me this name, used to live on Kristof Square in Kristóf Panzio.

We made one more little detour in Váci Street. We wanted to see our Book Shop. Its front had been heavily damaged but above the entrance the decorative trademark bookshelf filled with books had somehow still remained intact. Inside the store, the shelves had all been emptied. The floor was covered with soiled books. Standing amid all the books were two horses. We were happy for them. At least they had found some temporary shelter...

We turned left on Régiposta Street. "Do you realize that you are no longer Rápolthy?"- asked Papa unexpectedly. This was almost too much for me to bear. I had just buried Mimikoko and now I had also to say goodbye forever to the little girl who never was.

We arrived to Szervita Square. It was almost a year ago that my Calvary had started here. I had now regained my legal name but to tell the truth I no longer had any idea who I was and who I am ever going to be...

EPILOGUE

For some inexplicable reason I always wanted to return to Szarvaskő. Whenever I would suggest such an outing, my parents refused vehemently. By the time I was an adult I had moved faraway overseas. I thought often about the harsh life of the 'Madonnas of Szarvaskő'. I felt that Fortuna had not been too generous to them.

In July 2000 for the centennial of Papa's birth a granite column was erected in his native village. I was present. It was a beautiful and quite moving celebration. We went from Budapest in the car of my good friend Lexy. Our friend Balázs was driving. Matthieu and his girlfriend, Anais, my two young French friends from Paris also joined us. There was a party that lasted through most of the night.

The next morning I told Lexy that it is absolutely necessary that we go to Szarvaskő. Without any hesitation, he replied: "No problem." He never asked why. If he had, I would not have been able to give him a clear answer, because I have never known why all my life I have wanted to go back there.

We had lunch in Eger. We took a long leisurely walk in the city. It was around three o'clock when we got back to the car. I was asked if I was familiar with the road to Szarvaskő. I said, no but it would become familiar to me as we went along. My intuition would be our guide. As soon as we left Eger, the road and landscape did become familiar. I could tell the smallest turn ahead. I could see the woods and the clearings before we reached them. We were approaching the village. Signs indicated that we could choose among several roads into the village. Balázs asked me which one we should take. I told him I would know the right road by feeling. This happened. We had hardly entered the village when I pointed out the house where we had lived. This was strange. This house looked completely different from what I remembered of the house we had stayed in.. I was asked if we should stop. I said no, let's go on straight ahead to the Church. I thought that I would get out of the car there. I supposed that behind the Church there would be a cemetery and by reading the gravestones I would find out what had happened to the Madonnas. Once we got there, again I did not get out of the car. I told my friends that we should go back on the same road that we came in on. "We are going to meet three old

peasant women dressed in black. These women will be able to answer my questions." There was silence in the car. I imagined that they thought that I was going mad or that they were witnessing a parapsychological manifestation. I also added, that if we do not meet these women, then the mystery of my return would remain as such.

We had almost left the village when we spotted three old women on the road. It seemed as though they were just coming from church. We stopped. I got out of the car. I approached them.

- Are you from this village?-I asked
- Yes.- answered all three.
- Do you know the Punyis?- I continued
- Oh! The Punyis! There are all gone. They are all dead. There was their house. She pointed toward the same house that I had.
- It is now beyond recognition. It has been rebuilt.

Talking to the old women I had learned only bad news. I asked if any of the men had came home from the front. I was told that none of them had and that none of the young women ever reached old age. Despite the awkwardness of what must have seemed to them to have been intrusive questioning, I continued. I asked if the Punyis were buried in Szarvaskő. I was told that the family has two graves here. At this point I knew that I owed some explanation to the three old women in black.

- When I was a little girl I spent an Easter here. It was a long time ago but I have never forgotten the Punyi family.

There was a silence. The women did not say a word. I had to say more.

- I always remembered the good people of the village. I wanted to come back and revisit but I had gotten far away...
- You came from far? - they asked
- Yes.- I replied.

One of the women, the most talkative one looked deep into my eyes and asked,

- Very far?
- Yes, very far.

When they heard this they seemed to be transformed. Their moroseness was changed into serenity. Somewhat embarrassed I opened my purse and took out some money. I gave it

to them and asked them to have a Mass said in my name for the Punyi family and also to put some flowers on their graves.

- There are two graves. On both of them? - asked the talkative one

- On both of them - was my reply.

I thanked them nicely and said good-bye. I got in the car. I looked back and could see that the previously stooped three old women in black were walking erectly. It seemed as they had become young and gay again.

In the car there was silence. The others felt that what have just happened had important significance. It became clear to me that I had to come back to Szarvaskő because I had a message to deliver to the three old women in black. I had to let them know that they were remembered and even very far away their village is not forgotten...