

XII

“I was not even at home for the birth of our daughter Kati, as I was called up again: we were taken to the Ukraine. Meanwhile Tibor found a job at the Somogy county plant of the Swedish-Hungarian Match Company; he moved there, thus leaving the Damjanich Street apartment free. We gave our little flat to my niece, Anni Simon, and we moved into the two-room apartment in Damjanich Street. It was in this apartment that we lived through the hardest parts of the war, the bombings, and everything that came afterwards. Mária continued to work at the Discount Bank, while from 1943 I had a position at the Hungarian River and Sea Shipping Company. From June of that year I was on the front for another nine months, and from June of 1944 I continued to fight in the war as a supply officer, until I was captured by the Americans. On 11 April 1946 I could finally return home, this time for good. For me, the war was finally over. Slowly, and with great difficulty, I began civilian life again. In 1947 our son Miklós was born: a living hope for a return to a calm, normal and happy life. Thanks to my true and deep friendship with Pista Salgó, his family problems also had an effect on us, and we had to swap apartments again. They found us a nice, large apartment in Buda, in Bertalan Lajos Street, which we moved into in 1949, soon to be joined by Pista’s father, Miksa Salgó. In 1950 I changed workplaces again, becoming the head accountant at the Budapest Free Port in Csepel.

Then this section of our life, so full of happiness and problems, was brought to a close when in 1953, together with many others, I was arrested.”

This is where my father’s memoirs come to an end, without any explanation of the reason for his arrest. I have no choice but to look for help to my own memories, but first to read through the letters sent back and forth between Damjanich Street and the Russian front in 1943, 1944 and 1945.

To all intents and purposes, Mother lived through the whole war alone with two tiny children. Fortunately she did not lose her job, and she received my father’s wage, too, but inflation grew so quickly that the money was practically worthless. One winter she had to buy a little winter coat for Laci, and it was then she realized that a year previously, for the present cost of the winter coat, she could have bought an apartment. Neither did her salary always arrive on time: she would often wait for the money in despair, because she needed it for bread; at other times she would confidently plan what she would buy if it came. Getting firewood was an eternal problem. It was rationed with vouchers, but even so it was hard to get enough. She didn’t heat until the first snow fell, and so lived with the two children in a cold apartment. In the morning she went to work, and her younger sister Ila accompanied the children; Ila had recently married, did not work, and was able to stay alongside the children until three o’clock in the afternoon; she had to give Ila a little money, too.

I have nice memories of Ila: we only called her ‘Ila’, used the informal with her, and all day long she did nothing other than play with us, give us food, and put us to bed. She was the one who made us filled chocolates to wrap up and tie to the Christmas tree. She refined the sugar with various flavours: chocolate, coffee, nuts, rum... She and her husband Feri belonged to the family; for many years she helped my mother a great deal, and then they started to come less often, until in the end we lost touch altogether.

We were prepared for the bombings at any hour of the day. Mother worked until 3 o’clock in the afternoon, and often she would not know whether she would find her children alive, or whether her house would still be standing. Then, when the situation became very dangerous indeed, she found a horse and cart which was going to Ráckeresztúr, and took us down to our grandmother. As urban children, we enjoyed the freedom of the village. I was hardly able to walk, but Laci would run after the chickens, shouting, ‘Please, Aunt Pipi, you have to wait, it’s lost a feather!’ A few weeks later we returned to Budapest, because it was not advisable to leave the apartment empty for too long.

Grandma Gizella sometimes stayed with us in Budapest, and sometimes she went to Uncle Tibor's; both her sons were far away, and she lived in Ráckeresztúr alone. Mother was always happy when she came, because she spent almost all her time playing with Laci. And the little rascal made the best of being able to do with his grandmother what he wanted: he scrunpled up her silver hair, he pulled her onto the carpet, and in return she laughed out loud in enjoyment of her first grandson. This meant so much to her. (Uncle Tibor first had a daughter, Erzsi, and a son, András, only later.) Yet the grandmaternal visits were not always tranquil occasions. She was demanding, and she complained to her daughter-in-law that she was not giving her the welcome she deserved.

In one of her letters (December 1943), Mother writes: *"I often think that in this over-exerted life of mine it would be best to hide away with my two children from everything and everyone and not to deal with anything or anyone. But... I can't. It seems mother regretted her reproachful letter, but she immediately sent a parcel to Laci's address. But it is possible to be happy for it? I know she loves Laci, and yet... In the next-door room there is a radio. Nowadays it happens almost every day that transmission is suspended because of planes flying over. Can you imagine what I feel at these times? Can you imagine how much my heart shudders for my two children? On these occasions I often think that the next few hours will bring the worst horrors of my whole life, and that I am here, not by their side."* In the office she would write whenever she was able, because at home she hardly had a calm moment. These were very hard years for them, even if, relative to many other housewives, her position was more favourable: in her own house, with a job, with two beautiful, healthy children, awaiting her husband's letters...

At every special occasion, whether Christmas, New Year or Easter, she would always be on her own, perhaps at the bedside of a child struggling with fever or flu, and the next day she had to go to work...

In 1943 the bank arranged food assistance for its employees: if pre-ordered, one could get a package of meat from a pig-killing, which was a great help to our mother, too. Meanwhile the situation became worse and worse, it was impossible to get anything, the shops were closed, or stood empty after being hit by a bomb. Not a soul was cutting wood and taking it down to the cellar. Fortunately my mother always found a doctor when she needed one, and medicine, vitamins, and she had the children X-rayed after they had influenza.

Mother wrote many letters to the front, and Father also sent letters home. They numbered the letters, and were thus able to check whether all of them arrived, or which were lost, which happened all too frequently. Many letters did find their way home, but of these few have survived. In one dated 20 September 1943, my father writes:

"On this day I can record a victory which not many of the commanders can boast. I was victorious in the one thing which is hardest for many, but easy for me. Today I was rewarded for almost three months of effort. My junior officer, Pécssek, announced that the men have decided they want to confess and take Mass. I was delighted, and myself took the lead in going to confession and Mass. You can imagine how pleased our priest was, and how he welcomed us. I sensed that I would never be able to achieve a greater triumph than this one was. For here it was not just simple solidarity at work, but my upbringing, which was so different from what people usually receive. Despite my age, I was able to lead people older than me such that they were happy to entrust themselves – in this case their lives – to me. In such a short space of time, I was able to convey to them the striving in my heart towards beauty and truth, such that the idea of the Mass today came to them quite of their own accord. I feel I have someone to thank for this: yes, God, because this can only be the result of the spiritual life which our cross radiates."

In the field of real war, amidst cannon and rifle fire and grenades, I think that evoking spiritual awareness in soldiers is no ordinary achievement.