A Mother's Kiss From the Grave

by Ibolya Grossman

Une femme juive canadienne raconte avec émotion son voyage de retour en Hongrie, sa ville natale. Pendant son voyage, elle fait la connaissance de la fille d'une amie qui lui parle du jour de son mariage, du baiser qu'elle a reçu d'un étranger dont la vie a été sauvée par ses parents lors de la deuxième guerre mondiale.

I heard a story about something which happened in a house where I lived involving people I knew.

The reason I went back to Hungary in the summer of 1989 was to attend the 45th memorial service for the Jews who had been deported, including my parents, from my birth-place, Pécs. After the service, I went to Budapest where I heard a story about something which happened in the house where I lived involving people I knew.

Before my escape from Hungary with my son, we lived in this seven-story apartment building in Budapest.

Now, visiting a few elderly couples in the building brought back sad memories to me.

Before the war, the house at 16 Nepszinhaz Street was very old but still in good condition and was kept clean inside and out. It had two courtyards, one in the front, another in the back and had 92 apartments altogether with over 300 people in them. Children were not allowed to be noisy and pets had to be kept inside the apartments.

This was the house from which my young husband was taken to forced labour camp in 1943 and later killed. This was the house where I had been frightened at every knock on the door, afraid that the police or Nazis had come for me. In this apartment I slept fully dressed on top of the bed, ready to hide if the Arrow-Cross bandits[1] came for me during the night. It was this house from which we were taken to a race-track on October 15, 1944, where together with many thousands of Jews from all over the city we were held two days and nights without food, water, or a roof about our heads and threatened with machine guns.

After we were and allowed to go home, I staggered starving to this house to beg some food from the superintendent. This was the house I escaped from in 1949 with my little son but we were captured and I was jailed. The opportunity to escape again came after seven years from the date of our first try; this time we were lucky.

For many years I had nightmares that I went back to Hungary and couldn't get out again. For twelve years I didn't want to go back despite the fact that my late husband's parents still lived in that house. Now the old house was in very bad shape. Tall beams had been installed in many places to keep the building from collapsing. Between the worn out red cobblestones of the courtyards weeds were growing. Garbage was piling up in the front courtyard, the walls were dirty and peeling everywhere. Many dogs were roaming and barking loudly.

When the daughter of one of my old neighbours learned that I was in Budapest, she organized a get-together with some other young women who were the childhood playmates of my son. As children they had all lived in this house.

On a nice summer afternoon we met in the *Hauer* pastry shop which I remembered from many years back for its excellent tortes. I still recognized the young women whom I hadn't seen since they were little girls. They all have teenage children now just as my son has. Over a cup of good coffee and a slice of *dobos torte* we talked about their lives in Hungary and our lives in Canada. One of the women, Marta, mentioned that her twenty-year-old daughter had just gotten married recently. She remembered her own wedding day some 20 years ago and how she missed the presence of her mother who had died years before.

Then Marta told me an unusual story about something that had happened on that day.

Late that long-ago afternoon, a car stopped in front of Marta and her new husband's home. A short, graying, middle-aged woman got out and went through the open gate of the garden straight toward her.

"I'm looking for Galambos Marta," she said.

"I am Galambos Marta, can I help you?" Then without a word the little woman hugged Marta warmly and planted a kiss on both of her cheeks.

"I have wanted to do this for a long, long time," she said, "to kiss you and thank you for saving my life."

"How did I save your life?" Marta asked in astonishment.

"It was your parents," the woman answered.

Marta stopped to gather her thoughts, then continued the story.

It was 1943 when a young woman walked aimlessly along the streets in Budapest. Finally she flagged down a taxi. When the

driver asked where she would like to go, the woman started to cry. Between sobs she said that she was Jewish and from the outskirts of the city. She was afraid to go home because her parents had been taken away with the rest of the Jews that day. She had nobody to go to. The taxi driver took pity on her and offered to take her to his home at 16 Nepszinhaz street for the night. He lived there with his wife and baby daughter.

The one night stretched into many months and the taxi driver and his family hid her despite the fact that the wife was also Jewish. They lived on the third floor of the back building. Across from them lived a man who belonged to the Arrow-Cross party and he was hostile and dangerous. Everybody in the house was afraid of him.

One day, he took the taxi driver's wife and another Jewish woman from the house to the nearby square and he shot both of them in the back of the head. The driver's wife wore a heavy winter coat with a thick fur collar standing upright. That collar saved her life because, by some miracle, the bullet stuck in the fur unable to penetrate its thickness.

"The taxi driver was my father and the baby girl was me," remarked Marta.

Unfortunately, Marta's father was captured and sent to a concentration camp where he died. The woman who was hiding at their place was sent to Auschwitz, but she survived. After the war, she went to Israel where she married and had a family.

On that summer night, Marta's wedding day, the woman's wish finally came true, to kiss and thank the child of the family who hid her and saved her life.

Marta finished her story. Tears gathered into my eyes as I remembered her parents, people I had known very well. Then hugging her I said in a low voice:

"Do you know my child, that it was your mother who kissed you on your wedding day through that strange woman?"

"I thought so too, aunt Ibi," she answered.

"But how did she know your new address?" I asked her.

"She went to the old house on Nepszinhaz Street to inquire about us from the superintendent. But the super was new and couldn't give any information, so she sent her up to Susie's parents who still live on the second floor. Because Susie is my best friend, her parents knew my address."

We talked a while longer, bringing back memories about their childhood. Then we said our farewell. I was sad, knowing that this was probably our last meeting and I would not see them again.

I have nothing left in Hungary—only painful memories. So I do not intend to go back ever again.

Ibolya Grossman escaped from Hungary in 1956. She learned to speak English and took a job at a bank. After 17 years, she retired and began writing. Recently, she received an award from the Book Committee of the Toronto Jewish Congress for her book, An Ordinary Woman in Extraordinary Times *(Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1990). Ibolya now lives in North York.*

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[1]The Arrow-Cross bandits were the Hungarian Nazis.

NATHALIE STEPHENS

femmage hommilière

tu connais mieux que quiconque
les quatre murs de ta maison
et la terre sous tes pieds
le vent a hurlé autour de toi
quand tu as poussé hors de ton corps
ce monde nouveau

tu balaies la poussière sur le seuil
de ta porte
déposée par les camions passants
et cueilles dans ton jardin
des fleurs mortes que la fumée
noire a étouffées

tu tends l'autre joue avant le coup
et ramasse devant le temps
les débris qui vont tomber

les racines du vieil arbre poussent
en toi t'attachant à cette terre aride
et le serpent vieil ami t'accompagne
tout au long de ta journée

s'il fallait t'écouter comme autrefois
on le faisait...

à ne pas confondre avec un
hommage familier

Nathalie Stephens est étudiante en humanités et en études du «tiers monde». Ses poèmes sont publiés dans LittéRéalité *et* The Authors.