

## Letters from the House of the Yellow Star

### I. June 1944

Dear Tomi, my little sweetheart, Granny Margit is sitting here now on the fifth floor of a tall city building, looking out the window and watching the Danube River and our *Rozsadomb* (Hill of Roses). From here, I can't see the part where our house stands, so it's only through my mind's eyes that I am watching you, as you are tidying your little sand cakes one by one on the bottom of the stairs.

Or perhaps you are not tidying them today, since there is nobody there to show them to, so it's no fun any more? Well, the woman who now lives in the room where Granny Margit and Grandpa Imre used to live is a stranger. She will not listen to your stories or your explanations, and your mom has no time to run downstairs to admire your cake decorations. Your mom has twice as much to do now, because she misses her substitute, Icamica, who used to dart happily to any of her several children, should he or she just open their mouth. Once you said that three is not many, and that only twenty is many. But when you become a father yourself, or at least old enough to read this letter, you'll realize that, when it comes to children, three is a big job, especially for a mother like yours, who always cares for others, and always tirelessly helps whoever needs her.

I heard that you are not as happy and as ready to laugh as before. I can understand that. A miraculous little boy like you can perceive many things, even the things that are not told to him, and like a living plant, every tiny piece of matter or drop of liquid will let him know if there is some trouble, or not enough water....

So did it happen, my little Tomi, that your granny Margit did not tell you, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of this month, while you were spooning your dinner, that it was perhaps the last time that she would ever kiss you, not knowing whether she would ever return to the old house on the Hill of Roses, where she once used to make sand cakes with you. She did not tell you where she was going, along with your great-grandparents, whom she is very anxious about, because they might not survive this sad and wicked journey.

Tomi, your great-grandpa is 82 now, and your great grandma is 78. That's much more than 'twenty-ten', and more than the 'millies' you found in the garden last week, when you ran out to count the red and blue flowers. You see, your great-grandpa built this house 40 years ago for himself, for your great-grandmother, and for the rest of us. He and your great-grandmother never lived anywhere else, and for a while they did not even leave the house or the garden. That is why I had never sewn the yellow star on their coat before. I only did it on Friday, when they were about to leave the house for the first time. The rest of us, we had already been wearing it for two weeks, although we can not get accustomed to it, and we need more and more courage and resolution to wear it day by day.

Great-grandpa, when he was told that he would be moving out soon, (until Saturday morning, the old and the sick were told that they might stay), just sat in his armchair for an

hour, sunk into himself, so that we could hardly recognize his face. He was ruined by despair. It was terrible to see him like this, since his heart was weak and excitement could kill him.

But then he wonderfully collected himself, defeated his despair, and his heart could calm down. He stood up and said, 'May it dry on their souls,' which meant that he would not take the deathly poison, he would not die by himself, he would not do this favor to those who hate us so much. And a hope must have stirred in his soul, too, that the sky might perhaps clear up above us before the final and irremediable evil comes.

Because leaving like this and finishing a laborious and beautiful life for someone who had always been spoiled by his fate, and who has been celebrated by thousands, is even more terrible. I have always been proud of my father, but never before have I felt his human dignity so much as on this Saturday evening. A little bit later he joined us in the salon, fully dressed, his hair combed, and he was smiling and talking to us, his eyes were young and his back straight. The English lady and the German lady who had switched rooms with us, so that we could at least move to a better place, were just standing there, not believing their eyes, and they were unable to answer his questions. The English lady dashed out of the room crying loudly, the German lady, who had already lived through things herself and had been hardened by life, was sobbing, too. I think that some day, when the war is over, they will perhaps tell their grandchildren in Berlin and in London about this 82 year old Hungarian scholar, who was so brave, when he was thrown out of his house together with his wife, into lawlessness and danger, to live among strangers, just because they were Jewish by birth.

And when we got here with all our luggage, your great-grandparents were calm, and they even managed to be happy to see the nice room and to feel the fresh air by the river. To tell the truth, we were given a much better place than many others, thanks to the English lady, and your old great-grandparents may not yet understand half of the horror which is about to happen to them.

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Now let me tell you what our house is like. Yesterday afternoon I was standing on the balcony, leaning on the iron bars and looking out into the court. Our room has a view on the Danube, but on the other side, where you enter, there is a long balcony running along, like in all the other large high-rise apartment buildings.

I was thinking of you. I saw you there before my very eyes and I was talking to you, and then suddenly it occurred to me that I can write down for you everything that is happening to me and inside my mind and my soul. So even in ten years from now, you will be able to know and feel and live through all of this, as you read these words, and compare them with your fading memories.

In ten years from now, when you read this strange letter, it will be your Granny Margit after all, even if she is already gone, who will tell you what happened in the summer of 1944, when you were so happy in our garden on the Hill of Roses, where you first saw the cherries ripen and the blue lilies blossom and where you learned how to make sand pies with beautiful decorations on top. And then Icamica suddenly disappeared. Ica, whom you loved so much,

and who was almost as beautiful as your mother - her sister - and who loved you dearly. Then your grandparents and your great-grandparents also disappeared, and strangers came to live in our home.

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I look down on the courtyard from the fifth floor. It's covered with grey cobblestones, and I see the tap. We have to carry all our water from there up to the fifth floor in buckets and in pots and pans, because the allied bombings destroyed most of the city's waterworks.

I have been watching the high, worn-out walls around me, the tiny piece of sky above me and the black iron bars under me. I suddenly felt dizzy, because I haven't lived in such an apartment block since I was 12. Ever since, I have only known the Hill of Roses, where nuts and cherries peep in through the window.

Two boys were playing in the dirty, gray courtyard. I knew that they had also been moved here by force, but they did not give in. They continued to play, even here. They were hitting a little white plastic ball, and they did this so skillfully that it flew up to the first floor. On the balconies and in the corners of the yard there were garbage cans full of paper and trash, and there were boxes, chairs, cupboards and tables, everything that couldn't be jammed into the rooms. Of course there isn't enough room for everything, since four or five families are forced to share a one-family room.

Outside, above the entrance gate, there is a big yellow star, and you can see all the adults and all the children wearing the yellow star. And those with the yellow star can be jammed into any place...

You will not have to wear this badge, even when you are older, and you will be able to stay in the good old house with your mom and dad, and you will be able to walk the streets freely and to go to pastry shops and get on the tram in front of other people.. It makes it a lot easier for your grandfather this way, that he could leave his house and garden for you and for aunt Ferike, who is my sister but does not have to wear the yellow star, rather than have strangers move in.

It made me happy to watch the two smart little boys and the flying ball. As I was leaning there against the balcony bar, not even the heap of boxes, furniture and trash seemed that sad to me any more, because they were saying to me that as we had moved in, so we might move out soon, and it's not worth cleaning it all up. One can bear any disaster as long as one has hope in one's good fate...

However, I can only wish that the worst will not happen. Something which has already happened in the country, where the Jews were corralled together like a pack of stray dogs, the women, the children, the old and the sick, and they were crammed into cattle cars, where they could only stand, and they were not given any food or water, and even the one small window was nailed shut, as if they were even begrudged fresh air. That is how they were set on their journey, at the end of which those who survived the trip got killed some other way.

The elderly parents of a good friend of mine were taken this way from Bekecsaba. Whenever I think about it, I am paralyzed. I feel a suffocating horror which I have never experienced before. And now a terrible picture intrudes into my mind. I can clearly see how my

father and mother are being grabbed by the arrow-cross thugs and pulled away from the door, and I am being pushed after them together with grandpa Imre, and I have no time left to give them the poison, which we keep in stock for final need. I try to drive away this picture. It cannot happen!

There are 200.000 of us just here in Budapest. There are not enough cattle-cars for that! The town is being bombed, and they can't organize a mass deportation. The sky will fall on them! They will realize what they are doing, and they will be confused in dismay, they will be at each others' throat or jump into the Danube... I don't know, but something is going to happen, because it must!!!

And just as I am leaning on that iron bar wrestling with these horrible pictures, what do I see? From up there, from that little square patch of sky, a small white flake is floating down. At first it twinkles, because the sun is still shining up there, then it fades between the walls. But it seems to know perfectly what it wants, as it descends straight down from floor to floor, between the bars. Now I can see that it's not a flake, but a winged seed, you know, with the open "parachute," like the one I showed to you in Bog Street when we were walking there for the last time. This one was alone now. It was streaming and fluttering down, disappearing from time to time between the grey walls, but my eyes could find it again and again. Where did it come from? How could it lose its way? From a big tree on the riverbank, or from a blowball, which we also call puffball? If it lands on one of the big stones it will never become a flower. It will be trampled as we go to get water, always at the same time, or it will drown immediately in the puddle there by the faucet. But the flower from which it came had a lot of little seeds, this one's brothers and sisters. And one of them may land in the grass in the park, and it will pierce its tip into soft and fertile ground, and it will grow. And this lonely one is not to be pitied either. It carried on well before it got lost and ended up in the courtyard of this block building. It had grown and ripened in the lap of a dandelion, and then it flew away, it fluttered and floated and danced and twinkled under the blue sky, in the sunshine. And it knows, it must know that many little dandelions will grow and blossom next spring, even if this lonely one will be trampled here in this muddy yard...

So you see, your grandma Margit is still a foolish child, and she will remain one until she dies. Although she knows it is foolishness, she cannot help thinking that the little seed did not float this way in vain. It was meant to get here and it was sent especially to her, to be a reassuring and comforting message to her, and an ally against her horrifying visions. When this happened, the four prison walls, the alien yard and all those madmen who have us in their clutches suddenly disappeared. And grandma saw herself as a young girl again, playing in a field in her short skirt, happily and proudly performing her little feats with two balls. She saw the poppies, the long, swinging grass and the pines at the edge of the field. Someone wanted her to remember clearly and strongly all the good things she used to have beyond these grey walls, and under the free sky.

I really wanted to show you that very smart little seed of another flower, which will coil up if you hold it between your wet fingers. But I could not find one there, in that street.

My little Tomi, maybe your grandma Margit will not show you that clever little seed, and she may never show you anything again, and you may not remember her voice or her face. Even if this comes to pass, and my face vanishes from your three-year old little memory, we will not lose each other. Because if you once see a budding cherry tree, or a yellow dandelion, or a gaudy wood-pecker at work, and whenever you run across a green field, or happily bask in the sun somewhere, I will be there, in your inquisitive joy and in your warm bliss, even if you do not realize it.

I love you dearly, my sweetheart, and I also love the little wonders of the field. And love, if it is real, is stronger than hatred. Hatred might kill me, it can do to my body what it wants. But Love will reach you from beyond death, as the setting sun will make the floating little winged seed twinkle over the fields, the rivers and the houses of the yellow stars...

## II. June 28, 1944

Yesterday, Forty-five people drowned in the air-raid shelter, just 200 meter from us, because a pipe had been cut by a bomb. The dead bodies and the torn arms and legs are still being pulled from under the rubble. We, too, were down in the basement, and we could hear the terrible crackling, rattling, crashing and rumbling noise, and we thought that there was a battle being fought above our heads, and either our own building or the one next to us was collapsing.

But we were not afraid. If the pogroms were to subside, we would surely realize the horrible danger of the air-raids, but now, as we are being threatened by a much more dreadful and foul way of getting killed, the bombs seem kind and friendly to us. I was thinking that they might come for us at any moment, and cram us in a cattle-car, like some stock to the slaughterhouse. And as this dreadful vision appeared in my mind, a fierce horror grabbed my heart, such as I had never felt before, nor probably anyone else living in a civilized country. And then the whistling, the roaring and the crackling of the bombs were just a caress to my ears. While the air-raid lasts, they cannot take us away...

The fierce warriors of the olden days lived the same way as we do now. The Vikings, whom I have always so admired, were all outlaws, free spirits who could be killed by anyone, anywhere, without consequences. What else could they do? They became the Viking warriors, and when there was a sea battle, they grabbed swords in both hands and they cut, stabbed and slaughtered without thinking, and they became invulnerable and invincible, and hundred years later, the minstrels sang songs describing their deeds. Neither woman nor house nor land were waiting for them. Why would they have feared for their lives?

Later, when men went on the crusades, many of them also ended up with a broken heart, deprived of their rights, disinherited and disowned...

Now, my little Tomi, you can see how foolish your grandma Margit is. Even in the basement of the house of the yellow star and in the midst of air-raids, she can't stop thinking about the old days and about what she has learned and heard about ancient things, and she is comparing them to what she is living through now. And when she discovers something new

and strange, and she can see it vividly, even if it is about her bloody and nasty reality, she feels real joy. Then she can feel closer to those people of the old days, and she can feel this all in her veins and her nerves, something which used to be just stuff about which she had read and learned.

Because I AM really living through all this. When I think of the deportations, especially of my father and my mother being carried off, I want the bombers to come again and the sirens to howl again, and I wish that we had air-raids all day and all night. When you read what I have just said, even if you think it over thoroughly, you will not understand. You could only know and realize my feelings if you lived through this.

But there is something else I had to realize during the past few days, and it is just as shameful and depressing: It is that *we do not change*. Even in the shadow of the most dreadful possibilities we go on with our everyday lives. We do not care for each other more or better than before. On the first and second days, something new stirred in some of us. We felt that living in the same house we became fellow sufferers, and we tried to behave that way - that others might feel this. Deep inside I felt a kind of expectation, too, along with the fear. And I thought that the others felt the same. But then we settled down, in this distinguished prison of ours. We got used to our everyday life here and we sank into it. We go on quarreling, fighting and hurting each other. We cannot rise above it. Your great-grandfather and mother, they can.

To see them sitting there by the open window, holding hands and watching the sunset is really elevating. Even the lack of creature comforts and the food scarcity cannot disturb them. They bear their lot more wisely and patiently than the rest of us do, but they know much less about what is to come, because we try to keep it a secret from them.

It is said that the war will change the people. It will make comrades out of them. The spoilt young gentleman and the insignificant grey clerk will risk their lives to save their mates from the fire, or dig them out from under the rubble. But this is not real brotherhood. It is just what the Germans call *Kameradschaft*, which they prize so highly, even though it only represents the foolishness, meanness and rudeness that these so-called *Kamerads* have in their souls.

If this present situation cannot change us, we shall be crushed like worms under the tanks' tracks, we will be trampled in the mud along with all that we have, or might have had ... our immortality.

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God, please save us from this disgrace! I should call You some other name, but this is the only one that evokes even a semblance of an resonance within me. I used to love You when I was a child, and I used to believe that You would give me what I was asking for, and it was good to turn to You. Back then You were right and strong, too, because it is the person who prays who creates the One whom he or she is beseeching, and then God will become similar to the prayer itself. I have never prayed to You since I grew up, although I would love to. Please liberate the child in me, for whom it is not a shame to ask for help, if she or he cannot achieve something. The child, for whom it is not shameful to cry when something hurts. Please tear off all these bits and pieces that hinder me. Make me capable of listening to that little sound that is

deep inside me, directing me, as it is there in each of us. Please elevate me to the one I might be. Please give me a flash, which can show me the sense in all this senselessness...

As soon as the all-clear was sounded, our neighbors started to produce their pans, bottles and paper bags, and they started to eat. And most of them were eating bacon, which would have been pushed aside with disgust by their fathers as something foul according to the laws of Moses. I watched their faces and listened to their words, but nothing revealed whether they were changed or moved, whether their spirits had been touched. They can only protect themselves against fear and despair by living ordinarily. If I talk to my parents, I do the same. I do not tell them such things as I am telling you now. Nor to grandpa Imre, although I am sure that his mind is not ruled by trivial thoughts. But I suspect that it is different for him - we differ in what makes him strong and what strengthens me.

...The early Christians used to pray and sing together before they were thrown to the tigers in the arena...

### III. July 1, 1944

The day before yesterday we sat in the shelter for three hours. The commander of the house drove us to the coal cellar, because according to the law, those who wear the yellow star are not allowed to stay in a room that is maintained for Christians. Your great-grandparents stayed in their place for a while, and even a woman who wore no star declared loudly that this law was foolish, that we should not bother with it, and we should let the old ones stay where they are. But later a rumor started that inspectors had come to the building next to ours, and then everybody was moved to the windowless, dark and dusty vault. Fifty of us were jammed in there together, and if the walls came down, nobody would be saved. The other shelter is large and airy, with only five or six people in it. But there are many more of us in this building - the house of the yellow star.

Great-grandma was sitting on a wooden box, leaning against a suitcase which had been confiscated. She was light-headed and she had trouble breathing. She has never been able to endure long in a closed and dusty room. I could see that she still could not understand what was happening to her. It was still beyond her that the world could have changed so much ... And their world had really turned around, more than ours. Poor mother. She did not say a word, it was not her custom to complain, but she was actually suffocating for three hours.

Meanwhile the anti-aircraft guns were crackling, especially the two big ones near us, by the Margit Bridge. The airplanes were rumbling and whizzing in large numbers, and you couldn't tell how many fell from the sky, burning, and how many shelters were hit in the neighboring streets.

I asked grandpa Imre what this badge of ours once meant, the one we have been wearing for two months. I had already heard that it used to decorate King David's shield, and it used to be the emblem of the ancient Jews. But now I was told what the color yellow meant. In the Middle Ages, all those who suffered from leprosy or from some other horrible infectious

disease, had to wear a big yellow patch on their coat above their heart, so that the healthy ones could avoid them. Now we were declared infectious, and although very few people know this historic meaning, it is nevertheless very shocking and embarrassing for them to see our yellow stars. I can tell you that even I struggled with an ominous fear, when I saw them in a big group for the first time.

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Yesterday, as I was looking at the silent and pale twilight sky, a bat scurried past the window. And in that second the thought hit me, that this must be the living symbol of our fate. Or I could say that this creature is our fellow-sufferer. In many villages, it is still a living superstition that evil lives in bats. If a bat is caught, people nail it by its spread wings above their entrance, and even those who are normally kind-hearted will stand there watching it wriggle in agony, tearing itself apart in fear and in pain. Even if pity stirs within an onlooker's soul, they will suppress it as something shameful. Because as they were told by their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, so they firmly believe firmly that the bat is Satan himself in disguise, who wants to intrude into their peaceful homes and bewitch them all.

My little Tomi, I want to believe that when you grow up, you will be the same as you are now, and that you will not be like these common people. That is why I am writing these unlikely letters to you.

But you have to know that it is not enough to cast away superstitions. There will be many other and more difficult tasks waiting for you. You must never believe in the "truth" professed by the strong who oppress and torment the weak, or by the powerful who trample upon the unprotected. Never deny your heart's compassion for any living creature. What is more, never learn how to close your soul when an inner voice is whispering that you should open it. I am saying all this to you, sweetheart, and to other three-year olds, who will grow up in a more beautiful world, as you certainly will...

In normal times, it is wonderful to see people respecting customs and the rule and law. If an individual commits an act of cruelty, say a coachman brutally hits his horse, he can be immediately rebuked, he can even be restrained.

But what do we see now? The villagers and the townspeople all around the country are watching, petrified and in despair, what the thugs and the policemen are doing to the local Jews - *without a word!* After all, they are following orders! The policeman is a person of authority!

This is how all the priests and noblemen must have watched the torture and painful death of our György Dózsa. This is how people must have watched all the peasants locked in pillories in the past. This is the way bored young ladies look at the worn face of a working woman. And this is how most Jews would watch Germans or Hungarian Christians, were they the ones being tormented, asking no questions either, even if most of those were innocent.

In ruthless and bloody times such as ours, *those who can go their own way, those who can reject custom and tradition*, are the only ones who can withstand the flood. This was the *real revolutionary humanity* of the early Christian martyrs. Do you know what they did? They

went and kissed lepers, although it was forbidden by custom and by law to even approach them. But they all knew, because they were compassionate towards their brothers and sisters, that being rejected and cut off is far worse than all their bodily sufferings, and they wanted to soothe that with their kisses. I am sure that they did not get infected as easily as those who were afraid of the lepers and avoided them. They had a deep faith in Jesus and what he had taught, and strong faith of the mind will make your body strong, too.

I might misunderstand the New Testament, but I think that this revolutionary kind of humanity was what Jesus proclaimed, and not just a simple and humble charity. When he said that if somebody slaps your right cheek, you should turn the other cheek, or if somebody claims your underwear, you should give him all your clothing, he must have meant that by putting your enemy to shame, you will win him over. For real love you will need strength, my dear. The goodness of the kind-hearted is not real love. The things Jesus taught were not new. All the prophets and the sages of the East preached brotherhood and fraternal love. But Jesus not only preached these things. At the same time, he turned them into a simple and warm everyday reality, even if this meant offending many customs, traditions, and proper conventional morality.

Because, my sweetheart, it is not those who follow ruthless orders and watch the suffering of their victims with satisfaction, who hinder the coming of a better world. They are merely mentally crippled persons, the sort who torment animals in their childhood as their main pleasure. For them, Jesus' life and death were in vain. And so, too, all the others with good intentions and the best faith. Their kind is just an ugly wart on the face of humanity - pathetic and disgusting, but not very dangerous. They are like harmful worms. We get rid of them, we do not let them multiply, but they are not worthy of our hatred. Alas, their numbers have increased a great deal lately, because they were bred in Hitler's Germany for his purpose, they are now selected for high offices, and they are supported by Hitler's propaganda. And this "noble" example is now followed by Hungary and by Austria. But as soon as the world returns to sanity and good people of sound heart and sound mind can breathe again, those emotional cripples will no longer matter. Like harmful worms, they cannot cause harm in a well-tended garden.

The fact, that all this filth could overflow to such an extent, and that a cesspool could turn into a sea, is the fault of others. Even we, ourselves, are responsible. Had we had more courage and integrity, had we been tougher and braver, we could have done more for our rights and our freedom.

All those who diligently go to mass and who receive holy communion, they can stay and quietly relax in their gardens. Even if some news about this horror reaches their ears, their conscience will soon be soothed, because - as they say - such things cannot happen in a Christian nation. This must be a myth or at least an exaggeration.

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Your young mother benefits from some protection provided by your father's ancient blue-blood family name and the misleading blondness of her hair. Meanwhile, she is committing many serious offenses and real crimes, thereby relieving her soul. She stays in touch with - the "unwanted population." She brings food to their secret underground hiding places. To parents ripped apart from their children, she brings tidings about their children, and to children hiding, news about their parents. More than that - God protect her! - when her boss leaves the shop where she works as a graphics designer, she forges identity papers and official seals!

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There is probably some meaning to the fact that goodwill, sound ideas and words are dying or disappearing with the wind these days, and that propaganda and the cunning fooling and mystifying of people has developed to such an extent. Perhaps our world needed to be whipped into shape, so that goodness, which had grown weak, would grow muscles again. Everything has a purpose in the wholeness of life. But this crisis will only take us in the right direction if we understand its warning. An illness is a warning that something has been done against the body and that it has to be remedied. But alas, is there anyone among the great ones now who has ears to hear or eyes to see ?

#### IV. July 5, 1944

Yesterday, I stood and waited at the parochial office of the Basilica from 11:00 in the morning until half past 4:00 in the afternoon, because a long expected announcement had been posted there. They are not promising anything. They are just asking "...all those who are legally required to wear the discriminating badge, and whose christening was validated according to the Constitutional Law prior to August 1, 1941, to report to the Church." Now the question is whether there is anything the Church can do for us, even if it wants to. But I can only get the necessary information if I go to the designated place.

There were many of us. We were standing on the stairs, from the doorway up to the first floor, but I didn't mind. I was glad to be there. My heart was beating happily and the Parable of the Prodigal Son was on my mind ... There is my dear mother, the Catholic Church, whom I had left unfaithfully, and for whom I didn't care at all as long as I got along well, but lo, she is forgiving me now, taking me back, welcoming me me with a kiss...

I was filled with a throbbing gratitude. I had been chased by beasts, my Lord, who wanted my blood... And I repaired to your Altar, as the outlaws of olden days...

I can now understand for the first time in my life, what the invulnerability of the Altar would have meant in the bloody and ruthless Middle Ages. I can see a young man in torn garment, bleeding from several wounds, lowering himself in front of the Altar of a forest chapel, embracing the Altar's stone ... Here he cannot be killed. From here he cannot be carried away ... I felt ashamed in the name of those who disdain the justice of Christ. And I was ashamed myself

...

It occurred to me that I didn't know my own religion, when I was eight years old. I had completed the first three years of home study, and sometime in 1888 or 1889 my father registered me for the fourth year in elementary school. This was the first time that I saw a classroom, and I was looking at the low benches with the ink-pots sunk in them, and the slidable blackboard. Surrounded by a bunch of noisy kids, I got frightened... What's your name? They asked me and I answered. But then I couldn't answer their second question. I did not understand it. What is your religion? "Wait," I said to them, "I'll ask my father." And I ran to my father.

So then the question came up at home as well, and I could feel from the voice of my father that in his small way, he was very proud of how liberally he educated us. His generation was struggling with all their strength to batter down the dividing walls between people, by means of writing, preaching, or any other way they were able to. And denominational differences were one of these walls. Yes. Perhaps their humanistic world view and their faith in Science were enough for him and for others like him, keeping them mentally strong and well-balanced. But for me it was not good to grow up in religious indifference... It is not the first time that I try to pray and I do not know how to begin. When I was a child I used to like to fold my hands, kneeling on my bed in the evening... "My dear God ..." But I was the same as your mom and dad then, I was like the others around me, among the most intelligent and best-educated people are in Europe.

While we grow up, learning and living in what we believe is a safe world, we would not dream of learning a new prayer... Only during war or when deathly ill or at the sickbed of their children can most men feel and realize that they are in the hands of a greater power. Then they can feel that their soul is not so heavy, and they are able somehow to pray. We women can live through that hour, in which we humbly release ourselves to a law that is much greater than any human law. We submit to it and entrust ourselves to it, even if we do not give a name to this power, which overcomes our body and soul. And when the baby breaks through and a miracle happens, we, who are far from being a nature people, can raise our civilized selves to the level of the mindless animals or the silent plants. But this state is very difficult to recall and it is even more difficult to relive it. Because the more comfortable and peaceful our world is, the more difficult it is to achieve that state, since men and women never become so estranged from Life, as when they live in safety for a long time.

But, forgive me, I have really meandered. I am now standing here on the stairs of the Parochial office in the midst of a multitude, and praying is the last thing on their mind right now. Some of them are grumbling around me, because people are being let in per groups of four, and it seems an eternity before we see anyone come out. Now a tall, maiden-faced young priest descends the stairs. His face is unconcerned as he passes by. He just tells us, rather unkindly, to leave a wider space by the gate in case others want to pass that way.

Somewhat later a junior officer appears in the door of the office. He is worried about the weight on the stairway, it might collapse, so he wants us to leave. But the crowd protests. Nobody wants to give up their place. Then another priest comes out, hearing the outcry. He realizes what it is about, but he is only concerned about the stairway, too, and not a bit about those who seek refuge at Christ's altar against the raging beasts.

After a few minutes a sheet of paper is handed around, on which we have to sign our names, so if there is a sudden air-raid, everyone can re-take their place afterwards. I am number 67.

The sheet had not yet reached half the people, when the radio started signaling an air-raid. We were chased away very quickly. I stood there in the street, not knowing where to find a house with a star. You see, we are not allowed to enter a building without a star, and they say that sometimes we are not allowed into the public air-shelters either. The sirens were not yet blaring, so I entered the Basilica.

I did not try to pray, I felt that I wouldn't been able to, after having seen those priests so closely. And the church was cold and unfriendly, too. I realized that I was hungry, and that it would be 5:00 before I could go back to our place.

I went out and I bought something to eat. It was strange to eat while walking, especially when I met an ancient Christian acquaintance of mine. I told her that I am not allowed to sit on a bench or enter a pastry shop or a coffee shop, and that I wouldn't be back at my place until the evening. She felt more ashamed than me, but I didn't comfort her. She would be having a good lunch within an hour, I thought.

Or am I unfair? Maybe she is deeply distressed by what is now called "the law" in her holy country? There must be a few people like that among them. And there would not be many more among us if the shoe were on the other foot...

I didn't hear the "air-raid over" announcement right away, so it was late when I got back to the Church office. People were lining up on the pavement now, since we were not allowed to stand on the stairs. There was not a word about numbers or the old claims. I had to stand at the very end of the queue. Apparently our morning policeman had been relieved, and the new one just read out the names immediately after the "air-raid over" signal, when only two or three people had returned. And when nobody walked up, he simply tore up the sign-up sheet.

I actually didn't lose much, as there were some seventy people in front of me this time as well. But you should have seen the faces of those who came later, and were informed that the list was no longer valid. Most of them tried to explain and prove their rights, and some clamored and ran to the policeman. We, on the other hand, were of course vigorously defending the new order, which benefitted us more than the previous one, and we directed all the late-comers to the end of the line.

The crowd was rumbling and grumbling, because it was extremely hot, and we did not understand what they were doing up there in the office. I estimated by our progress alongside the building's wall that it took me an hour to advance 2 steps in the direction of the gate. Of course, some people could have cut in somehow, nobody knows how many. Or there might be another entrance from the adjacent building for the protégés. It was now half past one, there were 200 of us, and we all knew that only a quarter of us would get their turn today. All the others would have to come back tomorrow, and start queuing up again in the morning, unless they were to hand out numbers to us.

The priests who pass us by, they just wave their hands and ask us to be patient. They don't look at us and they don't want us to ask for help or advice. The policeman rudely refuses to answer those who have questions, especially those who mention the list.

\* \* \* \* \*

I looked around. So, this is where I belong now. This is my place among the Christians of the yellow stars. On the left side of their chest there is the yellow star, and hanging from their neck there is the silver cross, or the medallion of the Holy Virgin. Even many of the men are wearing their amulets on their lapels, which they normally wear as a hidden necklace.

A slim and elegant gentleman is standing behind me. Nothing in his appearance suggests Jewish "blood." I only miss the sporting gun from his shoulder. And the woman with her round face and very black eyes standing next to me would only need a spotted shawl on her head to become a real perky young wife from the Alföld (the quintessential, "pure" Hungarian region - ed.)

A pleasant looking woman in a grey dress catches my eyes. She looks like someone who thinks a lot. Her hair is greying, but she does not dye it or wave it. She does not want to look younger than she is. She must be a grand-mother herself. We might be able to chat.

A long-legged young girl is standing some ten steps in front of me, tall and slim. She is somewhat like my daughter Ica. But no! When she turns around, she disappoints me, as she has the perfectly typical face of a young Hungarian lady, plain and uninteresting. Nor are her eyes as multi-colored and expressive as my daughter's. And where is my younger daughter now? Shall I ever see her again? And how dares this pretty lass show up with her yellow star in the streets of Pest by herself? One of our dearest neighbors on the Hill of Roses is madly looking for her 17 year-old daughter. Just a week ago she went down the hill to get bread, and then she simply disappeared. Her poor mother would be glad to know even that she is dead. Because being dead is not the worst thing, nowadays...

Suddenly a new question leaps into my mind. Like bumping into a taboo on my wanderings. What would I do, if I knew that Icamica was in the hands of a bunch of hangmen roaring with laughter!!? What would be left from me or for me? Could I think of praying, or hope for "good news," or think of the little secrets of the soul? Or that these harmful worms are not worth my hatred!? Would I be able to see the clouds or feel the warmth of the Sun? Would I be able to love you, my darling Tomi?

\* \* \* \* \*

For a long time, I stood in front of a sign forbidding something or other. I was glad to be interrupted by the policeman who walked by the queue and ordered anyone standing half a step away from the wall back to the wall, where the heat was even more stifling.

We were silent for a while, but when this force of arms retreated to the gate, the annoyance which had been bottled up broke out. The Hungarian-looking gentleman was railing-mutedly but most definitely. He scolded us. He said that “we” were happy to keep back everybody and that our glorious kind was always such...

He was bitter and an outsider. I felt that he was suffering immensely. He has nothing to do with his Jewishness. The star burns his chest. He might have denied it so far, or perhaps his parents hid the shameful secret of his background from him. He has been playing the role of the Hungarian gentry for half his life, with joy and with art, and now he ends up thrusting into this pit together with us of the badges...

Most of them of the yellow star are unfamiliar to me as well. We are segregated by almost everything, our clothes, our ways of thinking, our way of life. I did not grow up among them, and nobody ever made me feel that I was just an unwillingly accepted guest here in Hungary. But I do not want to belong to those who made us wear the star either, or those who are now just watching us with a slightly bad conscience, and a sleepy disapproval. Never.

My best friends and most of my spiritual brothers and sisters all come from this lower order. And I also think that there is something even more important to me, something which came to me in my blood: The restless history of my people, full of unjust incidents. We are more animated and sensitive, we search for the motivations of things and of the soul more eagerly than those who have lived on the sweat of their peasants, comfortably enjoying their pipes and their wines.

\* \* \* \* \*

My back and my head were aching. I have never stood for so long in one place in my life, and it was already past three. But I felt that I needed this suffering. Everything came to me so easily when I was a child, and I often felt that it would be good for me to wait in front of a closed door, or to sit in the last row of benches in the classroom, where the teacher cannot see me when I slouch off.

I already settled part of my old debts by wearing this yellow star, and now I can add to it by this queuing, too, even though there is no sense to it since it is almost certain that these priests will do nothing for us.

After the First World War, hundreds of people were lining up for hours for lard and for bread, but we got everything delivered to our house from the university, or somebody else did the queuing for us. Somehow, deep in my heart I did not like that to be so, but I rather just wanted to say no to things that anybody else was saying yes to. My inner protest was not mature. Now I have gone a step further. When I was scrubbing the veranda on the Hill of Roses a few weeks ago because an order had come that we were not allowed to have domestic help at home any more, I suddenly realized how all the peasant women and the working women had to kneel on rough stones and splintery floors from their early childhood until they grew old, and now I was doing this myself for the first time. At first I was shocked, but then it was a pleasant feeling, that I could remedy something now. It was romantic. And a self-delusion. Maybe. But there is truth in it as well, I hope.

\* \* \* \* \*

Presently a ruddy blond young woman came back with two children and she wanted to cut in front of us in the queue. A woman wearing a big hat let her know what the new situation was in a very clever but unpleasant tone, and she directed her to the back. The poor thing just stared at the woman with the hat with big, frightened eyes. She did not seem to understand what she was being told. She came from far-away Kőbánya, and she had just taken the children to have lunch. She was actually begging us now to make an exception for her. The people around her were not protesting, but the clever woman kept talking about order and justice. If one person cuts, she said, then the next one won't wait for his or her turn either, and order will break down. And then she said to the woman next to her under her breath something to the effect that these were perhaps not even the young woman's own children, that she was quite familiar with this song and dance, and that the young woman just wanted to awaken our sympathy this way.

I could not resist interrupting. I asked her whether it counted for nothing at all that the poor woman would have to take the tram from Kőbánya again tomorrow, with two children, and that we might really make an exception. This was more than enough for the woman with the big hat. She was already railing, and now she wanted to call the police.

'It is unbelievable, how mean one can be when one is in trouble!' I said, very rashly.

"Mean? Ha! If you are so kind-hearted, then go to the back yourself, and give her your place. Then I can understand!"

I felt suspecting eyes on me from the left and from the right and critical stares, too. I knew that it would add a lot to my credit if I gave my place to this young woman and went to the back. I am the alien here. What shall I do to make them listen to me, and not to that blind cleverness and that justice of the call-numbers?

Just then I saw that the young woman had meanwhile pushed her way forward into our row, and that she was not ordered back. So they had actually agreed with what I was saying, they just they did not agree me.

\* \* \* \* \*

It makes me glad to think, my darling, that in this you will be much smarter than me. When you know something better than the others around you, you will not hurl your justice at their heads. You will not want to alter or amend those whom you do not love. Because in your justice there is just as much sustaining and operating force as there is love.

\* \* \* \* \*

Half past four was dangerously drawing near, the time when we absolutely had to start home, if we did not want to be caught on the street. An athletic black-eyed young priest made his

way through the crowd, and he wanted to take in some ten of his protégés. The crowd grumbled, so his majesty turned to us very calmly and made a nice little speech, that he wanted to go up to the office and try to help us, but that he would do this only if he could take ten of his men to the office with him. Otherwise, he would go home. The choice was up to us.

But he found it better not to wait for our choice. He forced a way for himself and for his group, and the policeman let them in peacefully. If he really wanted to help us, he would have started earlier, I thought, upset. The most annoying aspect of this incident was how we were taken for a bunch of sheep - and rightly so.

I then asked an intelligent young man what he thought of passing out numbers again, so that we would not have to stand here for hours again tomorrow. Luckily he was also thinking about this himself, so now, having been encouraged by me, he went to the policeman and as far as I could see, he was not brushed off, but got answers.

Some five steps away from me a young mother was standing, her forehead high and her eyes clear, and a five or six year-old little girl was with her, and she was asking something from the policeman excitedly. I could understand some of her explanations, that she had a special letter from her daughter's Godmother, who worked upstairs in the office and who was waiting for them. And that she was ill and not able to stand about for hours. But the policeman did not listen to her, and he was not interested in the letter either. He rudely snapped at her to go to the back. I believe that he was afraid of us, because he had let those protégés in without a word, and now he wanted to demonstrate that he could not be swayed by anybody. The young woman jumped on him in despair and in the awareness of her right, she resolutely and forcefully shouted in his face.

“By no means! You must let me in if Mrs Undi is waiting for us! Can't you see that I am not well? I am going to faint! Are you human?”

Her face was beautiful and noble and her speech was straight and brave. I knew that she was pregnant, just that she did not want to tell the policeman. She was simply unable to accept that after five hours of painful effort she was just let down, along with her little daughter and with that other one who was not yet visible, even though their Godmother was waiting for them. The policeman did not understand her and he was not interested at all. He threatened to arrest her.

I knew that I had to give her my place. We were being admitted in groups of five, and two more groups would get in today. I wished that they would pass out numbers at least before we had to leave. To stand here for four or five hours again tomorrow... Today had been bad enough!

My head was buzzing, and my waist was stiff from the pain. But I knew that I would get over it. I am healthy and I have no child to carry. I would not die tomorrow either. I was now standing on the threshold, and the policeman's arm cut the row right in front of me. I would be next. But this nice young creature would not get in, she would probably faint from weariness and despair, and her little daughter would be frightened to death...

At last! Those call numbers are being passed out. Mine is number one. I can be first tomorrow. If it is not invalidated again... The jostling is unbearable. Everybody wants to get at least a number, if not allowed in today... Now the policeman makes way for me, but at the same time he takes my number from my hand. I did not expect this... I cannot be first tomorrow. I must make my choice... The young woman has been pushed back, and I can see her frightened, angry, tearful face. I grab her and I pull her with me. We get in and hurry upstairs.

In the office two desks are occupied, and the clerks work there calmly and comfortably. It's 5 minutes to 5, but they still accept us. They find the Register of Births for 1890 on a shelf, and my name in it. Then they compare that entry to my certificate of baptism and they enter all the data in another thicker book. They ask me for my present address very politely. They don't ask for "our address in the ghetto." Instead, they say, "tell me please, your address after moving together." Now I am sure that this is all they can and want to do for us.

The pregnant young woman is cowering on the chair at the other table, sobbing convulsively. The female clerk who is entering her data is stroking her hand, but she does not stop working. She just shakes her head disapprovingly. I think that she blames us for not letting her in ahead of us, not the *Jewish Deportation Decree*, or herself. She must be the Godmother of the little girl.

However, I feel ashamed. I was clever. I did not give her my place, and still I was able to help her. Although at somebody else's expense. The person who was number 5 in line probably still can't understand why the policeman stopped the line right in front of him. It doesn't matter. He'll get in early tomorrow. At least if his number wasn't taken from him... He can complain to the policeman tomorrow...

This nice little creature doesn't know how she got in either...It's all opportunism..., a cowardly kindness... a bit of shrewdness...But there is no trace of it, nobody can upbraid me about it...

While I am running to the station, my knees are trembling, my temples are pulsating, and every part of my body is in pain - and not just from exhaustion.

#### V - Undated

...Oh, how I am waiting for that blessed hour in the afternoon, when all the cooking and cleaning, the scrambling for potatoes and the dishwashing is over, when all the visitors have been left by the order of the ghetto. I am lying on the couch by the open window, watching the curtain string swing in the breeze, and the vast sky behind. I am watching it sway gently against a pale blueness, and I can feel the breeze in its rhythm and eternity...

At such times I think of you, and not only of you, but of all the other little boys and little girls, who run about in sunny gardens and do not know anything about the yellow star, who can

grow up freely and happily, not in a philistine atmosphere but in the way you grow up, sweetheart...

When you read this letter of the star (if it ever reaches you), you'll be a big boy. By then you will surely have seen pinewoods, clearings in the wood, and maybe a big, fat, fastidious pine tree standing at the edge of the clearing, all dark green, stretching its branches in every direction and growing freely in the sun.

But you will have to know something, and many people forget to think about this when they see their beautiful Christmas tree: Namely that all the other pine trees must grow in tight places, huddled together, always struggling for space, light and fresh air. Their lower branches are all crushed, without light and without air, their brown trunks are naked, and only their upper branches way up high are a happy green. The tree which can endure longer than the others will grow above them and when it gets sunshine, light and fresh breathing room, it will start budding and growing more quickly.

The fat Christmas-tree at the edge of the clearing is just growing and enjoying its luck, knowing nothing about the troubles and struggles and the deadly efforts of the ones in the dark. But those poor ones actually know more about the things which are further away and out of their reach. They can feel, and they truly believe that there must be another world somewhere above their heads. They can see the sun and the free sky with some blind particle or with an inner eye, even when they are suffocating in the tight crowd below. What else could provide the power for their great efforts? How else could they grow fast enough and stretch themselves high enough?

There must be believers and non-believers among trees as well. The nonbelievers will get tired, despair and give up soon, but the believers will get into the realm of light. Just don't tell anyone that your Grandma Margit is cramming such unscientific oddities into your clever little head!

Even if you can grow up in a lucky place, I want you to know more about the dark origin of life than those fat pines at the edge of the clearing. So that the roots of your thoughts and your feelings can reach far and can touch your poor and anguished brothers and sisters. That is why I am writing from here now, from this House of the Star, where I now live in constant danger and humiliation, almost like a prisoner on death row.

The broad-skirted, evergreen Christmas-tree is more beautiful than the naked and starving pine. And this is also very often so with people. The blessed warmth and light of sunshine brings forth smiles and kindness, but darkness creates wicked thoughts and mean nature. But is it so that the soul of a human Christmas-tree grows also grows more beautiful than that of others? No, because comfort and safety make you blunt and indifferent. The lucky ones live their lives in peace, and they do not care for those who are in trouble, and they do not like listening to any bad news.

I am lying on the sofa, watching the curtain cord swing back and forth. It is totally black now before a yellow-blue sky. I am listening to my inner voices, and I can hear how this letter of the star is carrying on within me. I can see you as well, just as you are now, at the age of three.

Your wondering little mouth, your bright eyes, and your happy smile, which convey life and creation. I would like to imagine this Tomi at the age of 14 or 15, but I can not...

...The sky is full of invisible winged seeds around us. The ideas and the feelings which want to be born, and the words which want to be heard are radiating everywhere, spreading in space, and they will grow into new life in some chosen souls.

\* \* \* \* \*

The beauty, the strength and the life-giving will of two species merged in you with something new. It was perhaps the pollen of a flower or the sound of a bird which those invisible currents carried and placed on that seed from which you grew. And you have grown in love. You must be better than most. If fate is merciful, it will let me think of you, until pain takes me away. Because at the root of everything that is growing within you, I am there, too. I am there in your games, in the tales I used to create for you or together with you, and I am there in what you think and feel whenever you see a smart little winged seed ...

My lucky bright green little tree! Grow and raise as many new green buds as you want. But know more than the fat pines at the edge of the clearing. Drink up all the pain caused by anguish and fear and segregation, from me and from all those who suffer somewhere else for some other reason. If your brothers and sisters live in you and you live in them, perhaps the circulation of this nobler blood will once infiltrate and warm up all the forest.

#### VI - Undated

I would like to pray, but I do not know how to start... My dear God...

No, I cannot slip back into my little crib, and it is no time for lies now. Even though I feel as helpless as when I was a baby, even more so. Our father who art in heaven... A beautiful prayer, but the priest recites it so many times, both in Latin and in Hungarian, and in such a different way from the way Jesus must have said it, that I cannot help but hear his voice and see his gestures, whenever I start saying it to myself.

And I become a schoolgirl again. But what then? If even in these unharmed and spotless moments I cannot rise, clean myself and collect some strength, at least a breath of air, then this is the end of me. I need somebody to turn to...somebody or something... No, I cannot slip back into my cot, and it is not true that I want to... I know that the Justice of Christ never comes true on Earth. Only a few dreamers could believe that, and they were stoned to death. And the Church distorted it and put it to shame. The Crusaders killed, plundered and put thousands of innocent people to the sword in the name of Christ. And for centuries those heretics who wanted to get back to Him have been burning on the bonfires.

But you need not even go back to the past. Christian nations have been killing each other here in civilized Europe for five years, they are throwing incendiary bombs on cities and

villages, and the Church still approves, blessing their arms. Hitler has not been excommunicated by the Pope. I know. This is all true. But not the whole truth.

\* \* \* \* \*

... In the old and great Germany there was a poet, the greatest master of the new German verse. In his youth he wanted to find God, he longed for God, but after a long and bitter inner struggle he was able to overcome this desire. Mind and Spirit had been fighting within him. The child of the new age of the many sciences, and the prehistoric child. At the end the New was victorious. The grown-up won and the great poet became the preacher of a faithful faithlessness. Mankind has grown up, and now it has to stand on its own two feet. God was a barrier to our growth, so God had to die. Now we know that we are alone in the endless universe, small and vulnerable. We have been wrestling with our fears for millions of years. In their dreams our childish ancestors had created a good and benign father and God above the clouds, but we do not believe in fairy tales any more...

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many people were thinking this way. There were many faithful nonbelievers who believed in Mankind. But the things that are happening around us rather show that mankind is wavering on its feet, and fear has become a greater despot to us than it used to be to our childish ancestors.

God might be dead, but the Devil is alive, and he is happily concocting some new nonsense tales in his cauldron from hell, tales which are even more wretched and dangerous. Pagan names and rituals, blood oaths, secret badges, racial theory...

We cast away our crutch too early. We put aside our tales too soon. I don't believe that we should desire to grow up so as to scorn fairy tales. And so as to want to stop fetching down a rainbow from the sky...

Isn't all this letter-writing of mine not a chase for rainbows? It is almost a certainty that you will never ever get a single line of these pages into your hands. It will be lost or burned to ashes together with me. If you survive the war, you will probably grow up in Paris. Your mom and dad are both at home there. And then you will become a French boy, who might not speak Hungarian at all. There is absolutely nothing that makes me believe that these letters of the star will ever get to you. But this is the only reality for me at the moment. The other one is... just a nightmare. The product of sick minds ...

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I really wish I could pray, and weave my prayer into the lines of this letter, but the "Dear God" version is really dead. I believe in the One and Almighty God, our Father... No! Because there is that "He suffered and was crucified..." I do hate the cross, and I am unable to love the Father who sacrificed his son.

... Ata, who is your mom now, was the same age as you are now, when she made me understand something very important, which is scarcely known or believed among pious

Christians. One night she cried out in her sleep very painfully, and she did it several times, until I woke her up and asked her, what's the matter, sweetheart?

"I am so sorry for that good man," she cried.

I knew that she was thinking of Jesus hanging on the crucifix. In those days there were crucifixes at almost every street corner, in the next street too, some 200 steps from our house. I immediately realized that the smart grown-up who had taken her for a walk that day, must have very honestly explained to her about the cross there.

That is when I realized, enlightened by my three-year old daughter, that this holy symbol, which can be seen everywhere, is not only the most barbarous and tasteless idol, hundred times uglier than the ancient tribal idols, but that it is also the most cunning and successful propaganda! The most efficient means of bluffing and blunting both mind and soul. If we bump into it every time, we shall not see what it represents. The pious believers cross themselves before it and put flowers at its feet, but meanwhile they keep sucking candy and eating away their bread. If they could see what is right there before their eyes, it would spoil their appetite and take away their dreams. But this tortured body with the nail holes in it is not reality for them, only a bead in the rosary. And the Church does not need anyone who has thoughts and feelings.

... I must forget about and cast aside the Church from my thoughts and from my feelings, as well as Jesus, who has been put to shame, and that priest, who took ten of his protégés in before our very eyes, and his colleagues too, who did not have a word for us when they were passing us by. I must find something that I can believe in, something which I can love, even if it is a fairy tale, or else I will be swallowed up by the abyss of this terror ...

... The Sages of the East before the manger... and a beam of light above their heads. You have had a long journey and you did not ask where the star was leading you, you just followed it with faith and happy expectations, then you arrived at a place where you can pray. Please, help me! There is a light gleaming out of your tale... I can see the infant, who is born! No, not the one who was later crucified, but the baby, because the world needs the infant and not the Jesus of the Cross! The infant who is born again and again, like the sun, which somewhere in the North returns every Christmas... Because He is the Be and the Maybe, He is the light after the long winter! Thank you, Sages of the East! Now I know that Christmas is the feast of light. And it is a beautiful pagan feast, too, when the Germanic people of the North salute the Sun after the winter ...

If the things we could learn from the three year-olds would infiltrate into our knowledge, if we could see with our own eyes, if we could hear with our own ears, and we could do so as they can do, and if we believed in the rainbow that it is not a fake, the rainbow that is needed in our true and human reality, even though it cannot be touched, then a new Christmas would come, a Feast of Light...

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*Margit Beke-Gorog (1890- 1988.) Was my grand-mother. She, her husband and her parents survived deportation into the Budapest ghetto.*

*During the last winter of World War Two (1944-45), we all went underground at the lakeside town of **Balaton Boglar**. The group included them, their daughters Ica and Ata (my mother), my father Jules, myself (Tomi, to whom the Letters from the House of the Yellow Star are addressed) my sisters Madeleine and Juliette and a host of other Jewish relatives.*

*In January 1945, my aunt Ica stepped on a landmine buried in the snow in front of our house of refuge, and she was instantaneously pulverized, along with two others.*

*From 1943 through 1945, my mother Ata and my father Jules forged false identity papers for numerous Jewish relatives and friends.*

*In 1944, my father donned a home-made Nazi armband and traveled to the train station in Kassa on the Northern border of Hungary, where deportation trains stopped en route to Auschwitz. He embarked one of the trains, packed with Jews being transported to their deaths. Acting as though in a position of authority, he ordered off the train several friends that he recognized. In that year, my mother's best friend, Biro Gaborne became pregnant. At great personal risk my mother gave Biro original certificates that helped her get into the maternity hospital, where she delivered a baby called Anna. Later on my father supplied Biro with forged certificates "proving" she was an Aryan Hungarian. Then the couple took Biro and the baby to their home pretending that Anna was their own daughter and Biro was the wet-nurse. In this way the group survived the Nazi atrocities. These remarkable acts of bravery saved many lives. (see Jewish Chronicle, Sept. 17, 1999; Embassy of Israel Press Release, Aug. 1999; Protocol from the Committee Meeting of Righteous Among the Nations, Jerusalem, Nov. 1, 1998, File No. 8253) On November 1, 1998, the government of Israel awarded my mother - and my father posthumously - the **Righteous Among the Nations Award** for this. Thee official award ceremony was held on September 3, 1999 at the Israeli Embassy in London, where my mother was living at that time. The official document states:*

*RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS: The award of Righteous Among the Nations is rare and is given to non-Jews who put themselves at risk helping save Jewish lives during the Nazi era. It is awarded by Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust Memorial, and the recipient's name appears on the Wall of Honor in the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem.*