In the Palm of God*

I was born in Karikás in 1944, in a family of artisans. My grandpa who died in the ’20s kept an ironmongery, selling scythes and pitchforks, and delivering copper plates to the Reformed Church. He was an lively, open-minded person with a command of several languages, a library of hundreds of books, and he was even in contact with the Peugeot works. He sent his oldest son to university and the second was an office clerk with the People’s Bank. My father was the youngest son and was apprenticed to a local master to learn the trade of locksmithing and attended a higher school of machine construction at Szeged. He didn’t really like Karikás. He got a job in Pest as a chief mechanic with the Water Works, but when the front reached the capital, he moved back to Karikás with his family, to the house of my mother’s parents. That’s where I was born as the third child after my brother and sister.

The atmosphere my parents created around us was decisive in my childhood. I don’t mean money but spiritual security. In spite of the fact that the situation after the war and in the fifties was not easy. Three generations lived in that house: grandparents, parents, children. The grandparents cooked separately for themselves, and we could choose where to eat. That was when I got used to my grandma’s cooking, her fine, heavy, typical Hungarian dishes. They were relatively monotonous peasant dishes with a lot of lard, but what can I do if that’s still to my liking.

Even in the hardest times my father took great care to give us all we needed. He always asked, “Where is the school going this vacation?” Then he paid for us. There were books at home and we could read freely. How interesting it is that when it was still forbidden to read János Kodolányi, he was our favorite. And Sándor Makai, or István Fekete. He is still my favorite. In addition to these, my parents had books by Kronin, and Gone with the Wind, and the like. They got us to do all kinds of work but also saw to it that our school progress was satisfactory. They had us learn languages although it was a crime to know English at that time. A tennis partner of my dad taught us English, for almost nothing. His monthly fee was thirty forints. We went to his place twice a week.

After the war my father could not return to Budapest, so he began working at my grandpa’s hardware store. They restored it from ruins. Gradually they began to equip it with the old stock and then in ’48 the nationalization interrupted it. He lost his job again and was forced to take a job as a pay-roll accountant at the electricity works. Then, being a mechanic by profession, he got employed by a construction firm in Kecskemét and worked there as the chief mechanic until his death. He was the only breadwinner, as my

* The original interview was made by Mária Monika Váradi in 1996 and 1998.

grandparents' land was expropriated during nationalization, so we had no tenants, no income. My mother was a housewife. So we lived on one salary, yet I don't remember we ever missed anything. Quite the contrary, my parents' friends, all those people they spent the holidays with and namedays and new years' eves together with were far more optimistic and happy than people are today.

I may be biased a bit, but I think my father was a marvelous person. He never lost his faith in life. He always found his footing in every situation. He spared his family and took care to keep the troubles away. He could turn every day into a holiday. He taught us to take delight in even the smallest things. Let me give a few examples. In our house, just like in all large peasant houses on the Great Plain, there was a kitchen large enough for a big family to have meals together. He could turn the carving of the ham into a joyful event. He said after every slice: "Mommy dearest, I simply have to straighten the sides, and then I won't cut any more slices. But look, it's askew again." And we could laugh, and although the ham had to last out a long time, it was straightened some more times, as long as the children wanted some. The smallest present was a great pleasure.

We were three children. When you are in company, it's often asked which is the parents' favorite. I was the youngest, and many parents like their youngest the best. But our parents were not like that. They always replied they had three favorite children, and we were always proud to hear that. We were always together, they never excluded us from anything. We could watch how they behaved, what they did. We mixed with the adults when there was a party on New Year's Eve or a nameday. Sometimes in another room, or a thick carpet was hung so that when we got sleepy, we could lie down, but we were there. I remember I was taught the tango by a friend of my father, a huge veterinary doctor.

We were present when the adults had discussions, but we knew it was only our own business. We didn't tell anyone, not even our friends, what we'd heard from them. We knew the lives of our peasant grandparents, we experienced the visits of the forced delivery collectors, that entire system. We understood how the peasant was made to hate the land. We knew it was forbidden to tune in to Radio Free Europe in the fifties. Yet, on the day of Julianna, February the 13th, my parents' wedding anniversary, the radio was wrapped in blankets and taken from one place to another. We children were clear about it. Even a gramophone was got from somewhere, although it was prohibited to congregate at that time, and a gathering like was already condemned as a public assembly.

My mother was a peasant girl. Funnily enough it often comes to me that she had a freer and easier life than a girl growing up in a Karikás peasant family. She did not cut the figure of a peasant woman working in the field but of a young lady going to the gym club, girls' society, dances. She told us a lot about her girlhood. Karikás was a real schooltown. There was a teachers training college, and the students were always prospective boyfriends for the marriageable girls. Grandma was displeased that she married a person without land, but dad had a personality that ingratiated him with everybody. He was a mechanic, too, with higher industrial education, coming of a prestigious local family of ironmongers, so he could be a match for a peasant, after all.

Mom was a good-looking, and pretty girl. I wish I'd been as lovely as she was. It could never happen to her what happened to me, this photographer telling me: "Don't laugh, dear, it doesn't look good with that crooked mouth of yours!" After the four elementary years she attended four years at a girls' highschool. There was also a housewives' training school in Karikás, and my father's sister often said, "true, your mother is a peasant girl, but what delicious cold meals she can prepare!" She was a very skillful housewife who always kept house until my father died. She was incredibly tidy and clean. She ironed tablecloths for 12 and 24 persons, and I still remember their neatness and smoothness.

She always wore skirts and blouses, finely ironed, splendid, clean blouses. She wore them when she was doing household chores and needlework. She could do needlework beautifully. She designed original motifs, which were still typical of the region. Her house was a real home. She was a peasant girl, but she had some freedom. She went swimming and did other sports. As a member of the MOVE sports club, she toured the country. And one more thing: her mother, a smallholder, gave the money to both her daughters to go to Budapest and buy their own dowry, the furniture, the china. It was very rare in this area for a parent to surrender the job of acquiring the trousseau. The two girls bought two identical Rosenthal crystal sets. It was later useful because they could get new pieces to replace the broken ones.

My father never stopped courting his wife. He often embarrassed mom, but we enjoyed it very much. Let me give an example. They were going to a party and mom was getting dressed. She never appeared undressed, she always had a petticoat or stockings on. Then dad would go up to her, kiss her all around and summon us to admire mom's beautiful legs. Hahaha. Mom was embarrassed and happy. I remember it so well. My father made mother always aware that he loved her and liked her. It was a love marriage. They met first in Budapest, at a gymnastics competition. The gymnast girls of Karikás earned acclaim with their white shorts being just a bit shorter than those of the others, showing just a bit more of their thighs. Well, as it turned out later, it was at this contest that dad, catching sight of Mom in the girls' team, pointed at her and declared, "this Karikás girl will be my wife." We liked to hear recollections of these things, and we knew that dad had not kissed mother until they had got engaged. One more thing: we said "you" to our parents (informal), and so did they between them, but of course, to our grandparents we used the polite form of address (formal).*

I was fourteen when my father died. My mother lived ten more years. It is awful to know that they were both clearly aware they were going to die soon. They had fantastic strength. My father lived to be 52. Earlier, he was never ill. He was a great talent at sports. He went in for every sport: skating, skiing, football, tennis, swimming and sailing. In football he achieved the most as a goalie. At about 26, quite young, he even went on tours abroad with his team, a noted Budapest club team called BEAC. They even went to the Canary Islands. His diary dating from this time is in our hands, and it is still my secret desire to visit the places he went to with his diary in my hand.

His illness progressed incredibly rapidly. A mere two months passed between its discovery and his death. He had the rapid killer, lung cancer. The tumor grew hour by hour. A great deal of new medicine was tested on him at the Institute of Oncology. They even came to Karikás to help him. His personality and behavior elicited sympathy wherever he went. He knew he was going to die, but he didn't tell his family. My sister and I went to primary school, our brother was a first year medical student. Thank God my father did not learn that his wife was not to get a single penny in pension after his death.

When my father died, my mother continued her life out of a sense of duty. For our sake. And she passed on the love that the two of them as our parents always gave to us. What they opened my eyes to is all decisive in my life. They taught me that family coherence, a decent way of living, integrity and a lack of anything to be ashamed of in the family are the real values. I want to pass this on to my children. We have talked a lot about our parents to them. Like me, they could not know their grandparents. But I remember my younger son's pride when he returned from school one day. The teacher talked about my father. He

* Translator's note: In Hungarian the formal mode of address is the 3rd person, the informal is the 2nd person.

was so happy because the teacher said things about him which made the others envy him. I try my best to acquaint them with their never-seen grandparents. Thank God I can project slides; my parents took slides back in the thirties. And we are all in them, at family events like, christenings, and family dinners. Everything can be seen. I can show them – look, I'm laying the table with this tablecloth because it was used when my sister was baptized.

When my mother died, I had just graduated from the High School of the Food Industry, my brother was serving his internship as a doctor and my sister was a draughtswoman. Mother lived with the cancer for five years. She had a peculiar combination of cancers. Polycythaema on the one hand, the hypertrophy of red blood cells. That concealed the kidney cancer. With her excellent blood test results, no one believed she was ill. This caused her a lot of agony, as she had to face up to a lot of malice. And as she had always been supported by her husband, she was a housewife, her only virtue was cleanliness, that's what she was an expert at, so what else could she become other than a cleaner. She did, too. My father's firm employed her. But she fell ill as a cleaner, too, but no one believed that she was ill as her blood test was always good. I can't illustrate the love that tied her to her husband better than this: she had her wedding dress, made of woollen Madeira crepe, dyed black and she asked to be buried in it. That's what we did. And I have always felt they are with us. That's my legacy. Not a building, not a piece of property, but childhood memories of two parents for whom I have often said thanks to God.

I studied well at school. I was little brains but always read. Even in the loo. I had to be chased out. It was an outhouse at that time, out in the courtyard. I could sit there for hours. I forgot all about myself when I got hold of a book. Yet I thought I was more talented than hard working. Now I feel I ought to have risen higher in the world, there was more to me, but somehow I failed. Here's one example. I have a superb flair for languages. I could not yet write when I was already learning English. I remember this because it was drawings that were used to teach me, which is a boy, a girl, a pear, an apple, a plum. I remember clearly.

I had a classmate who had a lot of trouble with English. Today, she lectures in English. But I did not get as far as a language exam. Maybe it's because I stayed in the countryside, maybe, because my dream of going on to study Russian and English at the university of Pest was foiled. I was not admitted, allegedly for lack of place. In '62, whether you were class-alien or self-employed was taken into consideration. I don't think though it mattered much in my case. I think I simply failed to come up to the mark. I realized that when I was waiting for my entrance exam, and I, a rural girl in the capital, found myself in a group of candidates all talking of taking lessons from this professor and that, spending years abroad, and so on. That I liked English, that I had a gift for languages did not particularly impress anyone.

After my father's death that failure was the first major shock to me. When the university sent me the note about my failure, I was also informed that barring an appeal, they would forward my papers to one of the five listed institutions. That was the time of the launching of the senior technical schools. One was the High School of Food Industry in Szeged. The justification for my choice was that Szeged was a nice town, and if it was to be the food industry, I went to a local canning factory and asked them – since we could hardly make ends meet – whether I could study on their scholarship if I were admitted. They told me I would get a grant if I got admission. I left for the entrance examination feeling quite indifferent and unexcited. Whether it was that or not, I scored a great success. They told me right on the spot I was admitted.

At first I wasn't particularly happy. But later, my life took a turn for the better, because the colleagues I studied with at Szeged were all excellent, clever kids whose family background barred their way to the university. Several children came from pastors' families

and others had studied at the secondary grammar schools of the Piarists.* There was one whose father was an air force officer before the war, and the like. Although earlier I loathed chemistry, the major subject there, my only repeated exam was in food chemistry, finally I took a diploma with honors. I liked to live comfortably, and there, in Szeged, it was most comfortable to study hard.

That's where I met my husband. I noticed a splendid player in the basketball team. Then we listened to fantastic opera records in the lounge of the students' hostel, recordings with Benjamino Gigli and Caruso, and when I asked who'd brought these records, I learnt it was he. It was clearly me who fell in love with him, not vice versa, and it was clearly me who felt he must be my husband and no one else. He was handsome, and a first-rate sportsman and he was good in his studies, too, because he had studied at a secondary school for food processing. But the thing that made me decide for him was simply ridiculous. We were celebrating the New Year at a friend's place, and then he opened the champagne bottle exactly the way my father used to do it. And the way he was holding the glass …he had a good-man's hand, somehow. Like my daddy. Then I said to myself: either him, or no one. Well, it's all a question of such things.

I wanted to have the wedding in a Calvinist church, though I had no faith at that time. But a few weeks after my mother's death, perfectly alone, physically and mentally a wreck, I was unable to arrange it, and I've been grateful to my mother-in-law ever since that she took it all upon herself and arranged for us to get married where they lived, in Orosháza. So, eventually we got married in a catholic church, though the church wedding almost fell through because my husband would not go to confession. He was looking at me imploringly that I should absolve him from this task. But I didn't help him. I didn't care it was not a Reformed wedding – all I was determined to have was a church wedding. So what I insisted on was not my faith but ceremony. We wanted Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto in B flat minor and Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor to be played. That was the most important thing for us, that's what bound us together at that time, these two pieces of music. And that every candle and every lamp should be burning. I got married in a white wedding dress – not in mom's, as I would have liked to at first. But the wedding was still a happy one.

Then we went immediately to Karikás. Both of us got a job with the canning factory. We were soon to realize that apart from giving a lot of seasonal work, that is, the load was not even over the year, the factory was against human dignity and the family. My husband was the head of a workshop for ten and some years, in the treadmill of three shifts. Saturday afternoon, Sunday morning, Sunday night – he had to go. But the factory had a very good creche and nursery school. One cannot but speak in superlatives about the social care in those days. The children of many a worker grew up there. And since the canning industry was specially subsidized at that time, the creche provided good care of the children. They got the first fruit in the year and their place was flawlessly clean. But the sight of women hurrying to start work at six, who had to set off with their sleeping children at five in winters, was terrible. It was inhuman to see children sticking out of baskets, tied to bicycles, wrapped in furcoats.

It would have been far better for families to work in one shift, to get up and go to bed together. But for the sake of the children, most parents took on extra shifts. These had its risks all right, and many families fell into the same pit: the men spent more time with their women colleagues, they went home with them at six in the morning, and just waved to their

* A religious order in Hungary.

wives at the factory gate and asked them if they'd bought bread and what was news at home, how were the children. Many families ran on the rocks because of workplace affairs. Many husbands betrayed their wives with colleagues. This trap was hard to avoid. It left terrible marks. We'd better not speak about it.

I was employed by the canning factory as their scholarship holder. I was assigned to the laboratory where I began to work as a microbiologist. My boss was a Russian woman called Tatjana. Many people hated her just because she was Russian, but I didn't. She was far more intelligent than her Hungarian husband. At the end of the first half year I compiled a micro-biological summary from the figures of the previous years which proved so good that I was appointed deputy microbiologist when my boss went on maternity leave. I spent practically 26 out of my 30 years as the head of the micro-biological group.

As I said it was not my choice to go and study at that special school. But when I got to the microbiology department in the factory, I did my best to get to know it as well as I could, to train myself in my profession. I got a lot assistance from the research institute of this branch in Budapest. I scored successes, right in the first years I had an innovation which I had taken from the dairy industry and adapted to canning excellently. And since we were the best factory of our line in the country, the university students were delegated there for training, the microbiologists starting at other canning factories were also sent there for practice, so everyone got to know me in our line of work over the thirty years. I had credibility, they knew when I said something it was worth listening to. I said nothing when there was nothing to say. But I insisted on professional knowledge firmly and rigidly, and always represented the viewpoints and interests of microbiology in the whole of the production.

I felt it to be my greatest moral success that our general director gave me a written commendation when I had successfully assessed the micro-biological differences between tomato processing at tomato juice plants and crated raw material processing. Though it brought no money to the house – I never felt I was appreciated financially, but oddly enough, it never bothered me too much. It was easier to make ends meet in those days than it is now. What counted was that no matter how many bosses I had, they had to know that when I said something it mattered. And when they failed to listen to what I said, there was sure to come reclamation from abroad as I had warned them. It was most important for me to protect production.

Our financial security began to get worse from '74. My second son was born that year, and I took the three years off that were due to working mothers at that time. Those three years spent at home with the two children were wonderful. I think it was the most meaningful period in my life. I had no claustrophobia, I wasn't bored at home, I had no nursing mother syndrome. Then I went back to work, and I must say I was always respected and honored in my job.

When I was a little girl I kept saying that empires all collapsed, the Russian empire would also collapse. I was crazy enough to voice this publicly to different colleagues, too. I was attracted to archeology, too, and I knew there was no great empire, be it the Persian or the Roman, that did not carry the germs of its collapse. Yet when the Soviet empire collapsed, it did come as a surprise. But, oddly enough, I never felt I was a prisoner. I always said that when you are mentally free, when you don't hide among the sheep, you can be free even when empires or tyrannies are in power. My parents didn't feel like slaves, but simply adapted to the times. I adapted myself to it, too, but not by serving that stupid ideology. I felt free. But of course I deemed it a highly positive thing to have the democratic right to vote in Hungary. It was like the fallen manna, so sudden and unexpected. That it did not take place with great upheavals, that the people could not be manipulated, set against one

another and made hostile to each other, filled me with joy. I am glad that it took place without a revolution and without victims.

In my life, however, perhaps an even greater change than the political turn took place: I became a believer. I remember that evening clearly. It was Christmas 1989, and I was brooding at home that for the first time in my life my elder son who was doing his army service at Cegléd could not be with us. Suddenly, the door opens and lo and behold, there is my son. And as he enters, Zefirelli's film about Jesus begins on television. I was so impressed that I decided I had to know how it was all written down. And with the help of Uncle Józsi, a friend of my father and a retired pastor, I plunged into theology. He was a marvelous teacher. My parents were not of the church-goer type. But, as I later learnt, they died believing. I got the funeral speeches delivered at my parents' burial, and I learnt that Józsi had often visited my father at the oncological ward and they had long chats about such questions. And I learnt that my father and mother parted from life praying.

I owe very much to the Bible, that finding my faith, I could let my parents go at last, and I didn't perish when I was dismissed from the canning factory. Although even the perm went out of my hair and my hair looked like fur. That's when I came to understand what the saying – her hair stands on end – means. And I didn't even go to church for some days, I was so ashamed and I was afraid someone would say: 'look they were given the sack, it's always the trash they start with.' Now I know I didn't behave in that situation as a believer ought to have.

This is the story of my dismissal: production stopped and we took this time to have a holiday at the Balaton. We arrived home late and my husband went for the mail, and I saw that both of us had a letter from the factory. I thought – how naive I was – that we had got some award as we'd been working a lot recently. But both letters said our employment was terminated with compensation. Three people were laid off in the laboratory, all three with high school diplomas. Those who remained in our place were technicians, skilled workers, those who were unable to perform the required work. When we went to the factory the next day, our colleagues told us the dismissal was announced to them at a lab meeting of a few minutes in our absence. They were afraid to call us at the Balaton, lest we should be so crushed by the news that we drove the car into a tree. No comment was attached, they were shocked numb, too. No one would have thought a microbiologist and hygienic specialist could be made redundant in a canning factory. We were dismissed in December, and in January the tuition fee was due for my son so that we practically lived on the unemployment benefit for nearly a year.

Weeks passed. We were in a terrible state of mind when we learnt that our immediate colleagues were sincerely compassionate and sorry for us and declared it to be unparalleled that a couple should lose their jobs at the same time a few years before retirement, after so many years at work, without being offered the possibility of utilizing their competence and knowledge in another field. Their sympathy meant a lot to us. Yet it is awful to become jobless after thirty years of professional experience, since your flat needs running, and I'm not the type to be late with paying the rates. We had to realize that like so many Hungarian families, we were a family without reserves in our fifties. Even though we had our car and our heated home. I saw no future, and I dreaded the period we were facing. Sometimes, when I saw the homeless I thought our lot might also lead to this plight. I realized that whenever there comes a change, there is a generation that falls victim. I would have accepted this role, had I seen some future. But I saw no future. I had no image of the future.

But then, I began to think more and more often: there are claims that can be laid to me, that if I am Christian, I must carry the cross. That's the point to Christianity, for the other end of the cross is carried by someone else. I experienced my weak-heartedness as a

conflict, and my failure at this test as frustration. I was able to fight all my life, I could face the challenge. But now I felt my human dignity was enfeebled, I had no strength. I wanted to hold my ground, but I could hardly do so. Sometimes I had hope, sometimes the darkest thoughts came to me.

When it comes to my mind that I and my husband were laid off together, I still often ask myself: why? Understandably enough, my character, nature, behavior suggest that I was not an easy person to handle. Yet, for thirty years I worked continuously, I was accepted, tolerated. But Sándor is different. He's quiet, which often led to conflicts between us. He never defended himself immediately, he is the type who waits because time will justify him. Had he stayed, I might have accepted that the staff had to be cut back. He never had conflicts with his bosses, unlike me, who is persistent, inquisitive, and who talks too much. Sándor was liked because he was docile, kind, helpful. It was painful to see that the staff reduction was not determined by professional competence. The professional values were no longer protected, unlike earlier. They needed those who were no obstacles, who had no opinions of their own, who said nothing, but kept quiet in complicity. I feel the ones who stayed on are bound together by an unsaid interest. It is a loathsome interest, though, to wade across human lives.

When I entered an action against the factory, the first hearing finished with the judgment being in my favor in the first instance, and I had the option to go back to work or get double or triple compensation because of their illegal procedure. But I knew I would never go back. The lawyer also told me that although the law reinstated me in my position, there I would be quite at their mercy. They would bring about the same situation by initiating disciplinary action against me and kicking me out without compensation. The struggle would have been terrible, and remembering the shock of the dismissal, I don't think I would have had enough strength to answer the challenge and prove again, as I had done in the previous five years that I couldn't be edged out because I was professionally invulnerable.

It was hard to get myself to take legal action. But, looking back, I must say that had I not taken this course, I would now be a loser morally, financially, and in every respect, and it would be even harder to put up with that painful dismissal. One more word about this legal procedure: life has marvelous things in store. I got to know such a brilliant person as my legal representative that I all but enjoyed the situation I was unfortunately forced into. The factory thought they would pull a fast one on me by insisting that I had to take part in the second hearing. I would say it was almost embarrassing how splendid a victory we achieved, for a few years prior to old age retirement there was no legal ground to put anyone out of work. It cost the factory large amounts to resort to this illegal way of dismissal and its consequences. Not only triple the compensation was declared to be my due, but they were imposed a punitive interest rate of 20 per cent, and all the court costs. This is sad because this burden was also to be borne by the factory workers, it didn't reduce the managers' premium. Anyway, after the trial I told my legal representative that I apologized to him and to the Hungarian law because I'd always thought where human relations could not help, law had no say. But it had, he said. He was right.

When I got the sack, I refused to take tranquilizers. But the tautness we felt over time passing began again. Sándor went to Pest to attend a job-seekers' course about how to sell himself. It was very useful, he liked it. It meant a lot to him, charged him psychologically. He was looking for his place, but he had no serious chance. The tension increased, time was passing, and it was autumn. My winning the law-suite was positive. At the end of the year, we got money. But we knew that in January the year was out and he had no job. In this situation, Sándor went to my son in Szeged, to the wholesale toy store, to have something to do. My son employed him because we knew it would mean a lot for Sándor to have

something to do. We interrupted the dole for nine days, too. At first we were very happy, we thought we'd found the solution, but it was hard to commute weekly. I was alone at home, Sándor worked from morning till late at night, and I was waiting for them. The boys in the mine – and me waiting for the weekend.

And when the time ran out and despair began to overtake us again, we got help, in the form of a phone call. I had a school colleague who I had studied with in Szeged and he asked how we were. I told him about my winning the court case, but that Sándor had no job, I had to tell. He said he would help him. And from January '97 Sándor has had a job. Since then, he's been working as a material and supply official in Kecskemét. The firm produces tomato powder, they have a market and flourish. They produce mainly for export, his salary has just been raised and about 40,000 goes to his bank account. After the third raise, my old-age pension is 35,100 HUF, so practically we are Croesuses compared to the dole of 11,900 HUF.

But Sándor hasn't become more talkative, unfortunately. I wish he talked more. Anyway, it gave him self-confidence to be employed again. And it also increased his self-esteem that the former colleagues at the canning factory always kept inquiring after him. Now we can say he has a job, it's a good job and they also know how he got it. It's much better to answer that, than to say there's no work, and no hope of getting any. I've always wanted to be simply a housewife. Now, I'm a pensioner lady at home, waiting for Sándor. And in the same way as I was not bored on maternity leave, I see it as a positive experience to be a pensioner. I do lots of things to keep myself busy. I have two old ladyfriends, who used to be my mother's friends, they are 87 and 89. Since one's been hospitalized for months now, and the other lives alone, both need help, and I shuttle between them. Both wait for me. That's my daily work, because if one day I can't go, the next day she comes and I dread to think what would happen if she fell. One is easy to please because she's happy when she sees me, the other has a more difficult nature. But interestingly, I can do it gladly because I enjoy their company. Many people ask me, not without some lurking thoughts, whether I am looking after them for money, and how much. I tell them I don't do it for money. I'd never look after old people for money.

And strangely enough, luxuries come to me these days, the Lord God has brought us so much blessing after the great misery. Situations have arisen which I could never have imagined. We go on holiday regularly. My friend has a property in a holiday home cooperative in Héviz, and I bought one in Gyula from my severance pay. I go to her place in Héviz, she comes to me in Gyula. We, the Calvinist congregation, also enjoyed an invitation from the church in Brehmen. It was a wonderful experience. When we were on a boat trip on the Baltic Sea and I was looking out of the round porthole at the sea, and the waiter was bringing German gulash for lunch – well, I had to pinch at myself to see it's me. When I look back at a year earlier well my image of the future was not sailing on the Baltic towards the Danish coasts, enjoying myself, with Sándor at my side.

Besides, I've been attending the Bible circle for five years now, every Tuesday. When we were jobless, we began to go. First, we had time, and second, it helped a lot. And the wonderful thing is that the more we progress in knowledge, the more frightening it is to read it, and I all but fear to take the Bible in my hand. It has so much weight. But at first it seems so simple to read it, you think you understand it. But when all the hidden world opens up, you are struck with awe. And I'm particularly grateful to our minister that he attracted my husband, too. I haven't had the joy of Sándor asking something yet, but I'm waiting, maybe one day he will put a question, too.

I only wish I could get rid of my phobia. When you have the chance to see the agonies of cancer patients, you can never forget it. When you are in a difficult period, you don't

care for yourself much. My eye is threatened by retinal detachment which means that if it happens, I must undergo an operation. They asked me at the ophtalmological department what I did. I said I used to work in microbiology, and with isotopes. Then, to sum up, there was a gall-stone operation, then the ultrasonic test found a cyst in my liver. I have two cysts in the left kidney. I nerved myself to have the cholelithomy and the liver cyst was also removed. Then my brother took a tumor off my skin that proved later histologically justified. Cysts here, cysts there, you can't know whether benignant or malignant. Histological examinations. I dread all such things, but I'm still a good patient. The skin tumor was indeed histologically positive, but no radiological or medicinal treatment was required. The removed cyst was benignant, and the lithomy was also justified, it indicated a chronic gall bladder inflammation that could easily lead to a pancreatic condition, to liver cancer.

I dread pain, I can say that since seeing the agony of my parents. And when you get in trouble, you say, "Oh Lord, you, who is carrying our illnesses, who has been crucified, save us from suffering. Please, help me behave rightly." That's how I prayed before the operation. And then I had no pain at all. The other day my brother added to my closing report that I needed no special diet. I tried to see what I had to arrange if I should drop out of the family. I told my two good friends where my last will was. They are the witnesses, they know it is in the Bible, and they know I must be buried between mom and dad.

The children were a bit taken aback when I told them how many health complaints I had and they were especially worried when I told them off saying you will be sorry when I'm no longer alive that I have no grandchildren. So I didn't tell them there was a cyst in my liver, and all that, I just spoke about the cholelithomy. For they knew I was safe in my brother's hands. My sister keeps crying for me, my brother keeps getting phone calls that he should check this and that, and I'm full of brown specks. So my sister is more worried than I am.

At present, however, I feel my fear has past. I experience it as a positive thing that I'm over the operations. Our friends in Karikás were very kind. I learnt later that when they got word I was in hospital they went to help Sándor. Even those who had no contact with my husband, just knew he was alone, took him food in a dinner-pail. It's natural that our neighbors in the block pampered him, but it was all so nice. Of course it often bothers me: isn't it strange that the parents of all our friends who behaved so kindly towards us had died of cancer? Anyway, it was heart-warming to realize that those who I thought didn't care much for me, neighbors, acquaintances, members of the Bible circle, came and helped when they got the news. And prayed for me, yes.

To be quite frank, I haven't thought about my misery as I ought to have done, haven't I merely chattered about faith but not truly lived it. I think I've failed. Yet, in a miraculous way, my faith has become stronger. A tribulation hit me against which I was kicking. I never dared to bravely ask, "Why, my Lord?" Well, my faith is stronger than to ask why all that has happened. I always longed to be at home. I am. My husband's employment is settled. My two healthy children have good jobs. I'm a happy pensioner. I live every day as a gift from God. We human beings long for love, and the Lord loves us despite all our frailties. He carries us in his palm. That's the point to divine grace. Looking back I must say that although some evil plot was contrived against me, God did not let it go through. I'm eternally grateful to my parents that they bequeathed to me an immense legacy: they taught me to love. I enjoy these years I have gsot as a present. I do my best to give. I keep an eye on my children from afar, but I love them most intensely. I'd be glad if they felt it. For I don't know how long they'll have me.

Translated by Judit Pokoly