

## Chapter 1

# TAKE MY SWEETHEART

My first memory goes back to the time when I was three when the tragic event happened with my mother. I couldn't have imagined that a child at such a young age could actually remember events so clearly if it hadn't happened to me. It is still as crystal clear in my memory as if it had happened yesterday.

The way the Hungarian Nazis, the *Nyilas*,<sup>1</sup> came to our courtyard on Király-utca<sup>2</sup> and ordered all Jewish people to come down. By that time in the war only the women were left – the men, including my father, had already been taken.<sup>3</sup> I remember the shouting, everyone running out to the railing, looking down to the courtyard, the shouting from below for all Jews to come down.

My mother went down. I remember holding onto the railing, pressing my face to it, crying for my mother to come back. I remember her calling up to me on the first floor, trying to



The courtyard on Király utca. Jackie and I took this picture during our trip to Hungary in 2001.

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1. Reference to the Arrow Cross Party (*Nyilaskeresztes Párt – Hungarista Mozgalom*, literally “Arrow Cross Party-Hungarist Movement”), a Hungarist party led by Ferenc Szálasi, which led a government in Hungary known as the Government of National Unity from October 15, 1944 to March 28, 1945. During its short rule, ten to fifteen thousand civilians were murdered outright, and 80,000 people were deported from Hungary to various camps in Austria. (Source: Wikipedia, Arrow Cross Party.)

2. *Utca* means street.

3. Reference to the *munkaszolgálat* or Hungarian Labour Battalion. *Munkaszolgálatos* were Jews who served in the *munkaszolgálat*. In 1938, the Hungarian Labor Service was transformed into a forced labor institution directed mostly at Jews who were excluded from regular military service. At first, the upper age limit was 25 years, but it was raised in April 1943 to 37 years (in April 1944 to 48, and on October 21, 1944 to 60!). In April 1943, my father was just 36 years old and qualified for conscription. Only the lucky few who escaped the brutality of this work survived. Thankfully, my father was one of them. (Sources: Jewish Budapest by Kinga Frojimovics et al, Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999, p. 369; and *Jewishgen.org, Hungarian Jewish KMSZ (Military Forced Laborer) List*)



The only picture of me with my mother,  
1941.

house. But despite her agonizing promise to me, I never did see my mother again.

“Take my baby.” She called me her *csoppség*<sup>6</sup>. My little droplet. The word has no equivalent in English. It’s a term of endearment: my precious bundle . . . my darling . . . my sweetheart . . . all rolled into one. All her love and yearning contained in that one small drop of word. I was her one and only *csoppség*.

I can still hear the echo of her words despite the long decades that have passed since that awful day. They are still there, frozen in time, fresh as they were when first uttered, thudding in the inner recesses of my brain.

They are still there despite my having heard them as a small child, too young to retain even a fraction of the ordinary memories that constitute one’s earliest years. Do I remember my playthings? My mealtimes? Not at all. But this was no ordinary episode. In an instant, it became a precious memory seared into my heart and mind for all time.

How and why was I spared only G-d knows. They always took the children, also.

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4. *Anyu* is Mother or Mommy.

5. She was sent on a *Fussmarsch* (foot march) of Hungarian-Jewish women from Budapest who were meant to serve as “defense line Jews” to build the Ostwall, the defense line in front of Vienna, in one of Adolf Eichmann and the Hungarian government’s final desperate plans to stave off defeat. (Source: *Jewish Budapest*, pp. 390-392).

Anna Porter writes: “The marches toward the border began in early November . . . They were marched about 120 miles, not allowed to rest more than an hour at a time, and had no food or shelter. They were guarded all the way by a brutal force of young Arrow Cross men. When they arrived, even the survivors were almost dead.” (Kasztner, p. 260)

6. In Hungarian, a *csopp* is a drop. So a *csoppség* alludes to the wee nature of a small child.

## Chapter 2

# THE POSTCARD

I was brought to the apartment on Rotembiller that my grandparents shared with my Aunt Ágnes.<sup>1</sup> We stayed there only a short time until all the Jews had to go to into the Ghetto.<sup>2</sup>

A few weeks after my mother was taken, the family miraculously received a postcard<sup>3</sup> from her, addressed to her father, ‘Somogyi József *urnak*,’<sup>4</sup> dated November 23, 1944, and bearing a Budapest postmark dated November 27, 1944.<sup>5</sup>

Written in pencil, my mother had used every square inch on both sides of the card to deliver what would be her last words to her family.

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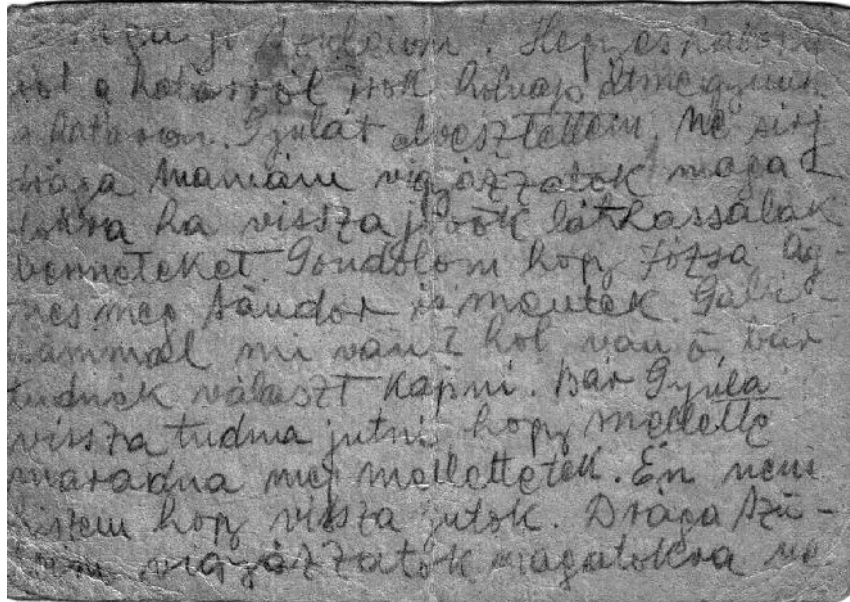
1. Before the war, the Rotembiller-utca apartment housed the entire extended family – my Somogyi grandparents, Aunt Ágnes, and my parents. When I was born, my parents and I lived in a tiny room at the back of the apartment. (Ágnes later let this room out to single people who came to the city for work; they were referred to as *ágyra járók* [lit., ones who ‘pass through’ to their bed] because they essentially paid only for sleeping privileges.)

2. The Ghetto was officially created on November 29, 1944.

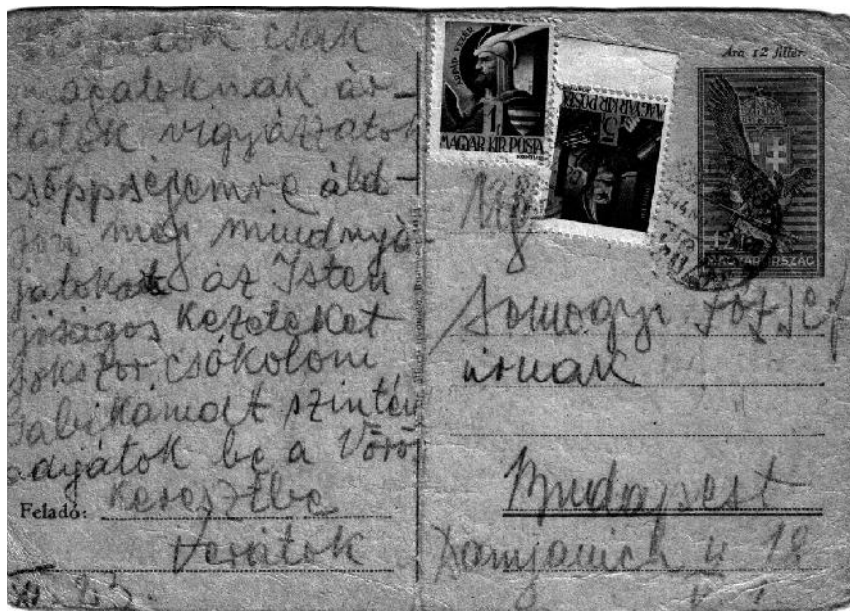
3. It always puzzled our family how it came to be that any postcard could be written by a captive of the *Fussmarsch* and properly delivered to its addressee. Thanks to a brief entry in *Jewish Budapest* (p. 393), by ‘chance’ you discovered that the International Red Cross (IRC) had conducted an inspection trip precisely from Thursday, November 23 to Monday, November 27, 1944. Their aim was to observe the deportations, ostensibly to preserve the fiction that the prisoners were being ‘properly’ treated. Our best guess is that their presence enabled the women a rare chance to write postcards to their families. (More than likely, they were not given a choice; the IRC ‘tourists’ no doubt had their own reasons to compel these letters to be written: they could attest that Geneva Conventions rules had been ‘followed;’ then after a few miserable days of ‘touring’ in the bitter cold, they could turn a blind eye, postcards in hand, and return home, leaving the perpetrators free to continue their messy work of mass murder.) My mother dated her postcard on November 23, 1944, the first day of the IRC’s ‘tour.’ No matter. But for the IRC’s fateful presence, it is doubtful whether anyone would have ever heard from my mother again.

4. An honorific meaning ‘Master’ or ‘Mr.’

5. A mystery that I have been unable to solve is the fact that the postcard was addressed to my grandfather at Damjanich-utca 18. I have no recollection of that address, as the only place I remember them residing before and after the war was on Rotembiller.



Last postcard from my mother (front)



My mother addressed the card to her father on Damjanich utca 18, which is a mystery to this day. I don't recall any of us ever living at that address. My Nagyapapa was always on Rotembiller.

*Drága jó Szüleim!*

*Hegyeshalomról a határról írok. Holnap átmegyünk a határon. Gyulát elvesztettem. Ne sirj drága Mamám vigyázzatok magatokra ha vissza jövök láthassalak benneteket. Gondolom hogy Józsa Ágnes meg Sándor is mentek. Gabikámmal mi van? Hol van ő, bár tudnék választ kapni. Bár Gyula vissza tudna jutni hogy mellette maradjon meg mellettek. Én nem tudtem hogy vissza jutsok. Drága Szüleim vigyázzatok magatokra ne'*



*vissza tudna jutni, hogy mellette maradna meg mellettetek. Én nem hiszem hogy vissza jutok. Drága Szüleim vigyázzatok magatokra ne sirjatok csak magatoknak ártatok. Vigyázzatok a csöppségemre áldjon meg mindnyájatokat az Isten. Jóságos kezeteket sokszor csókolom. Gabikámat szintén adjátok be a Vörös keresztbe.*

*Verátok.*

*XI. 23.*

Mailed to:  
Somogyi József urnak  
Budapest  
Damjanich-u 18  
V.1.

In translation, this is what she wrote:

My dear parents!

I'm writing from the Hegyeshalom border.<sup>6</sup> Tomorrow we're crossing the border. I've lost track of Gyula. Don't cry dear Mother; take care of yourselves; if I return I want to see you. I think that Jozsa, Ágnes and Sandor were also taken.<sup>7</sup> How is my Gabika? Where is she, if I could only know. If only Gyula could get back, to be near her and you. I don't think I will come back. My dear parents, take care of yourselves, don't cry, you are only hurting yourselves. Take care of my baby, may G-d have mercy on us all. I kiss your blessed hands over and over. Please place my Gabika with the Red Cross.

Your Vera

November 23

That precious postcard to this day serves as one of the only mementos I have from my beloved mother.<sup>8</sup>

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6. Between Hungary and Austria.

7. Happily, she was wrong about that.

8. In 2016, I donated the postcard to the Los Angeles Holocaust Museum. A digitized copy is available online at <http://www.lamoth.info/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=9512&q=Somogyi>. Today there is a plaque at 2 Bethlen Gabor tér, at a martyr's monument in the courtyard in front of the Bethlehem tér synagogue, which is housed in the building of the Institute for the Deaf and Dumb in Outer-Erzsébetvaros, with an inscription for Komlós Gyulané (ie, Mrs Gyula Komlos). Additionally, there is an inscription in memory of Veronika Somogyi Komlos on the back of Aba's headstone in Baltimore, at Rosedale Cemetery, commemorating the events that led to her death. May her memory be a blessing forever.