

PHYSICS OF SORROW

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Trophy Words

Szervusz, kenyér, bor, víz, köszönöm, szép, isten veled...

I will never forget that strange rosary of words. My grandfather strung them out on the long winter evenings we spent together during my childhood vacations. Hello, bread, wine, water, thank you, beautiful, farewell... Immediately following my grandmother's quick and semi-conspiratorially whispered prayer would come his *szervusz, kenyér, bor...*

He always said that he used to be able to speak Hungarian for hours, but now in his old age all he had left was this handful of words. His trophy from the front. My grandfather's seven Hungarian words, which he guarded like silver spoons. My grandmother was certainly jealous of them. Because why would a soldier need to know the word for "beautiful"? And she simply could not accept calling "bread" by such a strange and distorted name. God Almighty, Blessed Virgin, what an ugly word! Those folks have committed a terrible sin. How can you call "bread" *kenyér*, she fumed, in dead seriousness.

Bread is bread.

Water is water.

Without having read Plato, she shared his idea of the innate correctness of names. Names were correct by nature, never mind that this nature always turned out to be precisely the Bulgarian one.

My grandma never failed to mention that the other soldiers from the village had brought real trophies home from the front, this one a watch, that one a pot, yet another a full set of silver spoons and forks. Stolen, added my grandfather, and they had never even taken them out to eat with, I know their type.

But my grandmother and Hungary were not at all on friendly terms, between them that spirit of understanding and cooperation as it was called in the newspapers back then just didn't work out. Quite a while later I came to understand the reason for this tension.

I found it strange that my grandfather didn't like to talk about the war. Or at least he didn't talk about the things I expected to hear and had seen in movies, the constant battles, artillery fire, kurrr-kur-kurrr (all our toys were machine guns and pistols). I clearly remember asking him how many fascists he had killed and bloodthirstily awaited the tally. Even though I already knew that he couldn't chalk up a single kill to his name. Not one. And to tell you the truth, I was a bit ashamed of him. Dimo's grandfather from the other neighborhood had shot 38, most pointblank, and had stabbed another 20 in the gut with his bayonet. Dimo took a step forward, thrust the invisible bayonet a foot into my stomach and twisted it. I think I gave him a good scare when I dropped to the ground pale and started throwing up. It's awful getting stabbed in the stomach with a bayonet. I barely survived.

Live Medicine

The slugs slowly drag themselves across the newspaper, without letting go of it. Several are timidly clinging together, body to body. My grandfather grabs one with two fingers, closes his eyes, opens his mouth and slowly places the slug inside, close to his throat. He swallows. My stomach turns. I'm afraid for grandpa. And I want to be able to do as he does. My grandfather has an ulcer. The slugs are his living medicine. They go in, make their way through the esophagus and stop in the soft cave of the stomach, leaving their slimy trail there, which forms something like a protective film on top, a thin medicinal layer that seals off the wound. He learned this recipe on the front. Whether the slugs come out the other end alive and well afterwards, or die as volunteers, plugging up the embrasure of the stomach lining...

A huge hand lifts me up and sets me at the opening of a red, warm and moist cave. It is not unpleasant, even if a bit frightening. The red thing I have been placed on constantly twitches, slightly bucking and rising, which forces me to crawl further in towards the only available corridor. At the entrance there is a soft barrier, it isn't difficult to overcome. It's as if it opens on its own, in any case it reacts when I touch it. Now there's the tunnel, dark and soft, which I sink into, horns forward, like a slow bull. I leave a trail behind me to mark the way back. I feel safer that way. The way down is easy, the path is short in any case. The tunnel soon broadens and ends in a wider space, a quite soft cave different from the first one I passed through. At one end I notice a brighter spot, sore and radiating warmth. I pass over it slowly, leaving a little slime. I don't like this place at all, though. It's cramped, dark and musty, claustrophobic, as if the walls of

the cave are shrinking and pressing in on me. But the scariest part is some strange liquid that the walls themselves are pouring over me and which is starting to sting. I don't have the strength to budge, as in a nightmare where you keep moving more slowly and slowly and slow...

To feel for everything, to be simultaneously the swallowed snail and the snail swallower, the eaten and the eater... How could you forget those few short years when you could do so?

Sometimes, while writing, he feels like a slug, which is crawling in an unknown direction (in fact, the direction is known – there where everything goes), leaving behind itself a trail of words. It's doubtful whether he'll ever follow it back, but along the way, without even meaning to, it may turn out to be healing for some ulcer. Rarely for his own.

Have a Good Trip

And yet, my grandfather did have his secret from the war. On that January night, when he wanted the two of us to be left alone, the door to the unspoken opened just a crack... He called me in, the eldest of his grandsons, the one who bore his name, I was 27. We were standing in his room, low-ceilinged, with a little window, where he had grown up with his seven sisters, where I had spent all my summer vacations as a child. He could hardly speak due to the recent stroke. It was just the two of us, he went over to the wooden sideboard, rummaged at length in one of the drawers, and there, from beneath the newspaper lining the drawer's bottom, he pulled out an ordinary sheet of notebook paper, folded into four, quite rumpled and yellowed. Without opening it, he pressed it into my hand and signaled to me to hide it. Then we sat there, embracing, as we had when I was a child. We heard my father's footsteps in front of the house and let go. Two days later, my grandfather passed away. It was the end of January.

Lots of people came to see him off. He surely would've been anxious if he had seen them. The sons and daughters of his seven sisters arrived from all over, laid some meager winter flower by his head and placed their order for the beyond. The dead man is something like express mail in these parts. OK now, uncle, give mom our best wishes when you see her. Tell her we're fine, that little Dana is graduated this year, everything is tip-top. Oh, and also tell her that her other granddaughter left for Italy. For now she's just washing dishes, but she's got high hopes. Well, OK then, uncle, have a good trip. Afterwards the nephew giving these instructions kisses the dead man's hand and moves away. He returns again shortly, apologizing, he'd forgotten to say that they'd sold the house in the village, but it was bought by good people, all the way from England.

Well OK, goodbye again and have a good trip. Have a good trip. In these southeastern regions people don't say "rest in peace"... they just wish you a good trip. Have a good trip.

Side Corridor

A friend told me how as a child she was convinced that Hungary was up in the sky. Her grandmother was Hungarian and every summer she came to visit her daughter and her beloved granddaughter in Sofia. They always met her at the airport. They would arrive quite early, craning their heads upwards like chicks until their necks grew sore, her mother would tell her: your grandma will show up any minute now. The grandmother from Hungary who came out of the sky. I like this story, I immediately tucked it away in the warehouse. I suspect that when the Hungarian grandmother passed away she simply stayed up there in heavenly Hungary, waving from some cloud – except that now she no longer lands.

The Chiffonier of Memories

Four months later, in the middle of May, I was driving to Hungary in an old Opel. I had suggested to the newspaper I was working for that I write a story about Bulgarian military cemeteries from the Second World War. The largest one is in Harkány in southern Hungary.

The boss agreed and here I am on the road through Serbia. Harkány, once a village, now a small town, is close to the site of the Battles of Drava. I soon left the highway and chose a more varied route through Stracin, Kumanovo, Prishtina, then I turned towards Kriva Palanka, through Niš, Novi Sad... I wanted to take all the roads my grandfather had trudged over on foot through the mud in the winter of 1944. I had carefully studied the available military maps for the movements of the 11th Sliven Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, First Army. I drove, and in my pocket sat that folded sheet of paper. A Hungarian address was written on it.

I reached Harkány. There would be time for the military cemetery. Before that I wanted to find a house. I wandered for a while before I found the street written on the paper. Thank God the street name hadn't been changed during those 50 years. I parked the car at the very end of the street and set out to find the house. It was only now that I stopped to think that, in fact, I had no idea what I was expecting from this late visit. My grandfather had lived here, billeted during those couple of calm weeks before the battles. Happy and worried at the same time. There's the house, built before the war. It's larger than my grandfather's, I note with a certain envy, more Central European. It has a big garden with blooming spring flowers, but my grandma's tulip's are

prettier, I tell myself in passing. At the far end of the garden there is an arbor, sitting inside it is a woman my grandfather's age, with white, well-groomed hair, with no kerchief. I realize that it is not at all certain who she is. Over 50 years, houses change their inhabitants, people move, they die. I press the front gate, a bell above it announces my arrival. A man in his 50s comes out of the house. I greet him in English – I could've done it in Hungarian, thanks to my grandfather's lessons, but I keep that to myself for now. Thank God, he speaks English, too. I explain that I am a journalist from Bulgaria, I even show him my press badge from the newspaper and say that I'm writing an article about Bulgarian soldiers who fought in this region during World War II. Have you been to the cemetery? The man asks me. I say that I haven't been there yet. I'm interested in what the people living here know, what they remember. He finally invites me into the arbor with the elderly woman.

This is my mother, he says. We hold out our hands. A light, distrustful handshake. Her memory is failing, he explains. She can't remember what she ate for dinner last night, but she remembers the war, there were Bulgarian soldiers here, I think they were even quartered here in the house. Then he turns to her and obviously tells her who I am and where I've come from. She only now notices me. Her memory is a chiffonier, I can sense her opening the long locked-up drawers. A long minute, she has to wade back through more than fifty years, after all. The man seems ill-at-ease with this silence. He asks her something. She turns her head slightly, without taking her eyes off me. It could pass as a tick, a negative response or part of her own internal monologue. The man turns to me and says that at the end of January she suffered a brain hemorrhage and now her memory is no longer quite all there.

The end of January, you say?

Yes, the man says, slightly puzzled. What difference could that make to a foreigner?

My grandfather fought in this region, I say.

The man translates. I can't explain how, but I'm sure she recognizes me. I'm the exact age now that my grandfather had been back then. My grandma also said that I am the spitting image of him – the same bulging Adam's apple, lanky and slightly hunched, with the same distracted gait and slightly crooked nose. The old woman says something to her son, he jumps up, apologizing that he hasn't offered me anything to drink and suggests cherry cake and coffee. I accept, since I want to stay here longer and he darts into the house. We are finally alone, sitting

across from each other at the rough-hewn table in the arbor. The table is quite old – I wonder if my grandfather sat in this very arbor? Spring has gone berserk, bees are buzzing, nameless scents waft through the air, as if the world has just been created, without a past, without a future, a world in all its innocence, before chronology.

We look at each other. Between us lie almost 60 years and a man whom she remembers at 25, and whom I saw off a few months ago at 82. And no language in which we can say everything.

She had been a beautiful woman. I try to see her with my grandfather's eyes from January of 1945. Amidst all the ugliness, mud and death of the war you enter (I enter) the European home of a girl of twenty-something, blonde, with lovely skin and large eyes. Inside there is a gramophone, something you have never seen, music unlike any you've ever heard is playing. She is wearing a long, urban dress. It is calm and bright throughout the whole house, a sunbeam passes through the curtains, falling exactly on the porcelain bowl on the table. As if the war had never been. She is reading in a chair by the window. Some sound draws me out of the picture. Her glasses have fallen to the ground, I hand them to her. Crossing over half a century instantaneously is frightening. That beautiful face suddenly wrinkles and ages in seconds. First I thought of showing her the paper from my grandfather. Then I decided that I shouldn't. We've had these few minutes alone (how clever of her to send her son away).

In front of her stands the grandson of that man. So everything has worked out as it should. Finally, here is the living letter, sent with such delay. So he survived. He returned to his wife and his infant son, the son grew up and had a son... And now here is the grandson, sitting in front of her. Life had taken a turn, she had been forgotten, gotten over, everything worked out as it should... A long-deferred tear trickles from her eye and gets lost in the endless labyrinth of wrinkles on her palm.

She grasps my hand, without taking her eyes from mine, saying slowly in impeccable Bulgarian: *hello, thank you, bread, wine...* I continue in Hungarian: *szép* (beautiful). I said it as if passing on a secret message from my dead grandfather and she understood. She squeezed my hand and let it go. The last two Bulgarian words I heard from her were "farewell" and "Georgi". My grandfather and I had the same name. Her son reappears with the coffee, he immediately notices that his mother has cried, but doesn't dare ask. We drink coffee, I ask him what he does,

he turns out to be a veterinarian (like my father, I was about to say, but take a sip of my coffee instead).

Is your grandfather still alive, he asks politely. He passed away in January, I reply. I'm really sorry to hear that, my condolences... I could clearly see that he did not suspect anything. She had decided to spare him that. Or perhaps I have imagined everything. I've avoided looking at him the whole time, so as not to discover too much of a likeness. After all, the world is full of men with crooked noses and bulging Adam's apples. I got up to leave and kissed the woman's hand. At the front gate he shook my hand just a second too long and for an instant I thought he must know everything. I quickly let go and headed around the corner to the car. I opened up the sheet of paper from my grandfather. A baby's hand from 1945 had been traced in pencil above the address. Who could say whether it was the same one I had just shaken goodbye?