

A childhood memory

Written by Lassu Árpád

Being born in the 1930's, had no mercy on my growing years, as I was destined to witness and endure, the flaws, the disadvantages of Europe's political unrest of the times, which forced me to live through the entire length of WWII in my childhood, as well as its subsequent and equally nihilistic years. Some of it had been etched deep into my mind, as if it was carved into an aged tree's bark, meaning some had healed, some left open wounds, and invisible emotional or mental scars. The experience however, gave me an extraordinary perspective on things, whereby nothing, including life itself, meant more to me than the exalted feeling of freedom and the treasured tranquility I found in peace.

Those were the times, when I did not hear the deafening noise of bombing aeroplanes, the sounds of tanks, bazookas, katyushas, cannons, hand grenades going off, along with the rapidity of small arms firing all around me in random patterns, all destroying, wounding, and taking many lives unnecessarily. Alternatively, when the war was over, I was unable to avoid being witness to the all too often drummed up charges and accusations of zealous communists of innocent people, which consequently always ended with arrests, or sometimes torture, long jail terms, even untraceable eradication. Nevertheless, in that calamity I found some refuge when our family or at times our friends and neighbours got together at our place.

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As I recall one cold winter day, we gathered and we all sat around on small little stools of simple wood construction we called "sámli" or 'hokedli'. If there were too many of us, then some of us ended up sitting on wood stumps. We usually gathered before sunset to talk about everyone's daily problems, world and domestic politics, or the lack of everything from staple foods, spices to heating supplies, culture, sports and of course our pasts and hopes for our future. On other days we would just sit there, listening to the very quiet voice of the radio. mostly to programs from other countries, like 'Free Europe' , 'The voice of America', 'Novisad' for music or the BBC, all of which of course, at that time, was prohibited.

Slowly and always without notice, darkness fell upon us in the room, and that's when the real magic began. As usual, we drew the curtains shut tight if we used our kerosene lamp so that no light could escape from the windows to attract some trigger-happy sniper or a fly-by bomber. We used the lamp sparingly as everything, including kerosene was in short supply.

Then we lit a fire in our small cast iron potbelly stove, that has seen many days. That little stove had more magical power on all of us at once, than one could imagine. When we all felt that we had talked enough, inevitably the room fell silent in the dark. We did not light a lamp, unless of course it was absolutely necessary. We got used to the idea during the war years.

Then, as we all sat there slumped over on our stools and stumps surrounding the stove to absorb its heat, the fire in the stove eventually got a momentum and started to get the

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stove to a red-hot glow. The hotter it got the more it expanded and it started to show its tiny little hairline cracks here and there. It also revealed its gaps around the doors, cooking rings/plates and stovepipes, through which the multi coloured flames seemed to have splashed the coloured light rays of ghostly shadows on the walls, ceiling and floor, that gave us a mesmerizing light show to watch. which I thought at the time, was no less spectacular than the Aurora Borealis itself or now the modern day ubiquitous disco ball. The musical accompaniment to the light show of course, came from the crackling, fiery ambers releasing gases and splitting violently. Sometimes miniscule sparks wanted to escape from the fire in the stove by flying through any available space and dying before landing on anything, momentarily changing the effects of the projected lightbeams as they were dancing on the walls.

We all just sat there as if hypnotised by this seemingly magnificent phenomena. We were all together, yet untold worlds apart as each one of us was lost in our own thoughts, looking straight ahead as if staring into eternity and blocking everything out of our awareness, except for whatever mystical world we imagined we found in the ambiance the little crackling potbelly stove had provided us with. There was magic in how it was able to take us on this mystical journey of escape from reality, day after day. Moreover, it was really fascinating how it could create that absolute tranquility where there was no pain, no hunger, no struggle, no fear, hate, jealousy or need, just harmony, love and peace in everyone present, for as long as the fire lasted. It was probably the closest I have ever been consciously feeling as if I was in (what I imagined it would be like to be) in heaven.

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More than six decades has been weighting down my shoulders since those days, but when I revert back and re-live those times sitting around that little stove, my physical and mental burdens seem to disappear into thin air and I can feel my tightly wound nerves and muscles untangle into a mass of mellow, tender love and goodwill. How I have missed the magical effect of that little potbelly stove in my life, I can't say with mere words but, I have missed it more times, than I ever care to remember.

By : James Árpád Lassu

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