

HUNGARIAN REVIEW

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SEBALD IN MOSZKVA TÉR

Danielle Spencer

I am reading W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, and it is stirring many of my own memories, and memories of remembering, too. The character Austerlitz is sent away from his parents in Prague on a *Kindertransport* as a young child in the 1930s, a train travelling from the central station *Praha hlavní nádraží* west through Pilsen, Nuremberg, and on to Liverpool Street Station in London. His memories of early childhood and of this journey become deeply submerged and forgotten until he travels, many decades later, back to his home. When Austerlitz returns, he describes the cool air of the stairwell, "the smell of damp limewash, the gently rising flight of stairs, with hazelnut-shaped iron knobs placed at intervals in the handrail of the banisters". He is overcome by the rush of memories and must sit and rest his head against the wall before he continues to mount the stairs.

In the book there is a photo of a stairwell which reminds me of one quite like that in Budapest, in a building near what used to be called *Moszkva tér*, Moscow Square. The square is a large transit hub, with a metro coursing deep underground and a wide sluice of tram tracks along one side. You climb a set of concrete steps past the trams, and up the street is an apartment building, and at the top of the first flight of stairs was a woman we called Mamika, a Hungarian diminutive of Mama. She had been a high-ranking diplomat, but Mamika is what her children and grandchildren called her, and that is how I remember her.

Her daughter Kati came to my apartment on Bleecker Street in Manhattan for dinner last week. I remember sitting at the table in Mamika's apartment when I was ten years old on what I picture as a bench along the wall, surrounded by her grandchildren, as Mamika brought out dish after dish: soup with sour cream, dumplings, chicken paprika. I remember her warmth. I remember the intensity of her gaze – so present, and so loving.

On this particular night Kati and I were sitting at my table and eating the meal we had cooked together. Kati, who is a force of nature like her mother, was telling me about her family: Mamika was raised in Hungary but she had two

older brothers, an engineer and a doctor, who were living in Mexico to work and help support the family back home. Her younger sister was to travel to live with her brothers in the mid-1930s but for some reason she could not go, and so Mamika went in her place. I do not remember why they had to switch; I will have to ask Kati the next time I see her. While Mamika was living in Mexico the Nazis invaded Hungary. Her sister, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins – ultimately almost everyone was sent to the camps and almost everyone died. When Mamika and her brothers returned after the war, it was years before they learned that so many of their family members had perished. She lived for many decades still hoping that her sister was alive.

I had not known this story. How could I not have known? Mamika continued to search in vain for anyone who might have known her sister in Auschwitz. She never stopped looking.

I remember that we had finished eating, sitting at my table. Kati paused, and then continued to speak: When Mamika was in her eighties, some years before she died, she was hospitalised briefly. She had a roommate around her age and the two women talked, to pass the time, and they became friends. One day the other woman was changing her gown and Mamika noticed that she had a six-digit number tattooed on her arm. Was she in the camps? Mamika asked. Yes, she had been in the camps. Was she in Auschwitz? Yes, she was. Did she know her sister? Mamika asked, and said her sister's name – but the woman shook her head, she could not remember. She might have known her, but it was so long ago, over half a century since then.

Mamika asked Kati to bring her only remaining photograph of her sister from home to the hospital. She showed it to the woman, asked again if she remembered her. Again the woman shook her head no. And then the woman put her hands around the young girl's face in the photograph to block out her hair – for their hair was shorn in the camps – she would not have seen her with hair – and cried *yes*, cried her name. Yes I knew her. Yes, she was the baker's daughter, yes, yes we were friends, she said.

Years ago, years before I heard this story, I returned to Hungary. I had not been back since we last lived there when I was a child. I took the train from the *Gare de l'Est* in Paris to Munich, and then a rattling sleeper with its windows wide open to the night on through Germany and Austria east to the vast, arched stone *Keleti pályaudvar* in Budapest. I did not have addresses for our friends there, nor had I let them know I was coming. This was before internet cafés or cell phones, and before many Hungarians spoke English. I bought a thin blue paper metro ticket, the word for ticket – *jegy* – and the other words I needed

rising through my deepest recesses – and took the metro across the Danube River to *Moszkva tér*, as it was still known. I walked through the herd of yellow and white trams still waiting patiently at one end of the square and climbed the concrete steps. I walked not just through space but through time as well, to that ten-year-old self, still within me, who knew just the way, though I could not have told you which way to go – and who led me up the street to the stone building, into the cool stairwell and to the top of the stairs. I rang the bell, and Mamika opened the door.