

**Mihály Kornis**

**THE BALLAD OF MRS. KÁDÁR\***

*with footnotes*

*Authorized translation from the Hungarian by Judith Sollosy*

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\* This ballad is based on sentences taken from a series of interviews with Mrs. Kádár (*the weekly Magyarország, nos. 40-49, 1989, interviewer: András Kanyó*), the documentary radio play, *The Secret of the Kádár Villa*, by Péter Borenich (*Kossuth Radio, November 11, 1993*), and the documentary, *Those Who Keep Secrets*, by Anna Geréb (*MTV, 1994-1996*). It is the companion piece to the Kádár speech given before the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist and Workers Party on April 12, 1989, which with my emendations and footnotes first appeared in the journal *Beszélő* (May, 1996, pp. 68-98) AS KÁDÁR (HUNGARIAN DRAMA).

1.

I had eight years of schooling.

Then I became a shopkeeper's apprentice.

As a shopkeeper's apprentice

I worked in all sorts of shops.

The state owned Drug Store chain, for one.

After '45

I worked for the Party in various places.

I made the rounds of the villages after the war,  
to spread propaganda.

Back then, this was the thing to do.

Then they appointed me to the Interior Ministry  
and from there sent me to State Security.\*

When they arrested my husband,

I was kicked out of there, too.

I was not Mrs. János Kádár to begin with  
but Mrs. Ottó Róna.

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\* The infamous ÁVH (Államvédelmi Hatóság) of the fifties, the „fist of the Party” and the vehicle of the Communist reign of terror fashioned after the Soviet Cheka. The black car that took people away in the night was one of its feared trademarks.

Róna, he was my first husband.

Later he became manager of a bread factory.

From the beginning of '44

we lived at Bródy Sándor utca 30/b,

co-tenants in an apartment with lots of rooms.

The photographer Kázmér Iványi,

our co-tenant,

was a young man from a respectable family.

They owned the big pharmacy in Hatvan.

He was in touch with the Arrow Cross<sup>\*</sup>

so he tacked the Arrow Cross sign

on the door of our flat.

Kádár was our sub-tenant.

Kázmér Iványi

was soon taken to the front

from where he sent Kádár a postcard

except he was sitting in an Arrow Cross jail<sup>\*</sup> by then.

In 54, when they searched our apartment, they took the postcard, too.

We never got it back. Ever.

But I remember what it said.

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\* The Hungarian Fascists.

\* When the Arrow Cross came to power, they cracked down on illegal Communist organizers.

I learned it by heart.

„I think of you a great deal. I'd love a game of chess, except, well: there's nobody here to play with!”

Later he survived the war, too.

In October of '56  
I ran into him  
at the front gate of our old house.  
He was still living there at the time.

„Oh, madam,  
in all the confusion at the Radio”<sup>\*</sup>  
he begged,  
„they took my papers  
talk to your husband please  
I'm sure he could do something!”

Well, there was nothing I could do for him!

After the events of '56<sup>\*</sup> he defected

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<sup>\*</sup> In '56 the revolutionaries stormed Hungarian Radio which, incidentally, was located in the same street where Kádár and the later Mrs. Kádár lived during the war years.

<sup>\*</sup> Meaning the revolution of '56. Even Mrs. Kádár, it seems, couldn't quite get herself to call it a 'counter-revolution'.

and settled down in the United States.  
Twenty years later he wrote us a letter  
saying he's living in Niagara Falls  
working as a tour guide  
and he invited us to visit  
as his guests.

My husband's position, of course, would not allow it.

Still, we appreciated the gesture  
at least Kázmér Iványi wasn't pretending  
he didn't know us from Adam.

## 2.

When after the German occupation  
of '44 the Party reached a decision  
to send a man from its top ranks to Moscow  
to tell them what's going on here  
and also to contact Rákosi\* and his men  
Endre Ságvári\* was their first choice

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\* Mátyás Rákosi: the Hungarian Stalin, except he didn't last as long and was several centimetres shorter.. In '44 he and a group of others were in Moscow organizing the future Communist Party of Hungary.

\* Ságvári: like Kádár, Rákosi, etc., etc., a major figure of the illegal Communist movement before WW II. Also a major figure of the anti-Fascist movement. He died in a gun battle in 1944 when the police came to take him away. His looking „conspicuous” is a reference to his Jewish origins.

but he looked too conspicuous, of course,  
and was too young besides.

Kádár volunteered for the mission.

Officially I didn't know  
where he was going or what business he was about  
but I helped him pack.

I packed what he needed for the road.  
I also put two pairs of men's socks in with his things.  
As we later learned, one of them  
had my ring and wrist watch inside.

I forgot to take it out.

Luckily Kádár  
always so meticulous  
went through his things the size of a briefcase  
once more  
before the Germans caught him at the border  
and gave the ring and the watch to the woman  
who was supposed to take him to the partisans  
to put them on.

A wrist watch, there was no law against that.

But that woman was decent

because after they couldn't pin anything on her  
and released her  
in compliance with Kádár's request  
she gave my watch and ring  
to Kádár's younger brother, Jenő Csermanek,  
who gave it to Gábor Péter\*  
who gave them to me  
but he also told me to go  
visit Kádár at the Conti utca jail.\*

The Party found a lawyer even  
who for an exorbitant fee  
would see what he could do on his behalf.

I was sent  
to negotiate with him.

I had to look  
like money's no object  
so he wouldn't be loathe  
to ask as much as he wanted.

I dressed to the nines,  
the mink coat borrowed

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\*Péter: dreaded head of the infamous State Security (ÁVH) apparatus.

\*Kádár was apprehended at the Hungarian-Russian border in 1944 when he attempted to sneak across to see Rákosi who from 1940 to 1945 headed the Moscow-based committee of the Hungarian Workers' (Communist) Party.

from a neighbor, and a purse  
and besides  
I was still a young woman:  
a sight for sore eyes.

That lawyer didn't take much persuading.  
He took the case.  
But he also named his price too right away.

Two thousand pengõs.

I went to see Kádár in prison.

My instructions were  
to let on  
as we talked:  
the Party knows about his arrest  
and would do their utmost  
to effect his release.

A very nice sergeant took me upstairs  
but first I began emptying the purse  
to show him I for one have nothing  
to hide.

At which the sergeant:  
„I wouldn't mind  
a body search myself.

However, there's no need for any of this now."

After a short wait they brought Kádár upstairs.

He was very polite and kissed my hand.

His shoes were as bright and shiny as a mirror!

In those days they still let  
the prisoners use shoe polish.

Not like in Rákosi's jails!

Anyway, I say: „Shorty sends his love.”

„Shorty” was Gábor Péter's cover name.

From this he knew that the case  
was in the hands of the Party  
and they'd also find him a lawyer.

He had nothing to worry about. He was in good hands.

### 3.

Jenő Csermanek, his younger brother,  
died in the spring of '49.

His death was a fluke.

On May the First

he wanted to fix the decoration  
on their house  
because he didn't think it looked just right  
he climbed out on the balcony  
but it was broke  
and crashed down  
and buried him underneath.

His mother  
died the same year.

And then we got married.  
It was a curious tying of the knot, that's for sure!

I was not a young girl any more  
to make a big deal out of the ceremony.

The day before  
we visited the 3<sup>rd</sup> district council  
and requested them very politely to open  
at eight the next day  
because we wanted to get married  
but would have to go to work right after.

When the ceremony was over,  
everybody went about his business.  
There was none of your eating and drinking,  
no sir!

Our witnesses Péter and Kovács  
were brought by my husband.

My husband said:

I know Péter to begin with  
he'll be my witness  
and Kovács his.

István Kovács was a Political Committee member  
and Central Committee secretary\*  
and Gábor Péter was my superior at State Security.

An old, trusted friend from the underground.

4.

I remember everything perfectly  
it's not something you forget.

The Party Congress was held in February  
and my husband was arrested on April 21st 1951\*  
he was abducted on the street in broad daylight  
by Gábor Péter's men.

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\* Later I. K. became Chief of Staff in Imre Nagy's short-lived '56 government.

\* Yet another episode in the ongoing struggle for power within Party echelons. In 1951 Kádár, then Minister of Domestic Affairs, wanted to reduce the power of the Secret Police, headed by Péter, by bringing it under Ministry jurisdiction.

I wasn't working at the time  
I was on sick leave  
I left the hospital  
where I had an operation  
just a day or two before.

And now, this.

He came home at noon  
though he was a small eater  
and he didn't bother much about his food  
he came home for lunch whenever he could  
and we just sat down to lunch  
when the phone rang.

He went to pick it up.  
„Yes, I'm going back after lunch.  
Why? What did you think?  
To Party Headquarters, of course.”  
Then he left.

I didn't see him for three years.

He didn't say anything, just good-bye  
then went back to his place,  
what I mean is, jail.

5.

They abducted him on the corner downstairs.

Two cars

barred the way.

He couldn't have given them the slip had he tried.

There'd been a Party inquiry against him

by then for nine months

but my husband never told me.

Still, by February he must've known something was up

because when we left for the congress

where I was also invited

he said, don't be surprised

if at the end of the congress I'm not elected

even into any subcommittee.

I saw a thing or two during the war.

I knew not to ask any questions.

I knew better than that.

But during one of the breaks

Sári, Zoltán Vas's wife\* at the time, turned on me:

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\*Vas: an important Communist with a talent for organization who after the war saved the people of Budapest from starvation by organizing the shipping in of food from the countryside.

„Who does Kádár think he is,  
he's got his nerve telling me,  
the wife of Zoltán Vas, that...”

I don't remember any longer what.

Of all people  
it was Mrs. Ernő Gerő,<sup>\*</sup>  
who herself was considered  
a hysterical woman in her own right,  
who pulled her off of me: „Shut up,  
Sári, shut your mouth, that's enough!”  
Mrs. Mihály Farkas<sup>\*</sup> also joined in.  
It was the two of them than silenced her.

She let slip something, that was clear.

But I didn't say anything.  
I pretended I didn't know  
what she was talking about!

I was never in cahoots with them.

I never went to Party Headquarters either,

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<sup>\*</sup>Gerő: one of the four most powerful men in the country. First Minister of Transport, then Minister of Finance and Minister of State, from July to October of 1956, Gerő was First Secretary of the Communist Party.

<sup>\*</sup>Farkas: as Minister of Defense, one of the most powerful men in the country.

not then, not later.

The very idea!

Having people say  
behind my back: „Here’s the boss’s wife!”

I don’t like that sort of talk.

**6.**

The house search lasted till two in the morning.

Finally I told Colonel Béla Janikovszky\*  
to kindly tell Comrade Lieutenant-General Péter  
I finally understood something he said earlier  
in the underground:  
„When it’s my turn  
to do a house search  
even the pillows will stand at attention!”

Well, now I knew exactly what he meant.

They took everything they could lay their hands on

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\*Janikovszky: soon to be the feared ÁVH (Secret Police) doctor who decided if someone under interrogation could take more beating. (They usually could.)

but at eight the next day they showed up again  
and took me to my brother's house  
in a side street off of Fõ utca.

When my attendant got out  
in front of the Batthyányi Square market  
he called over his shoulder: „Be seeing you!”

And I thought:  
when hell freezes over  
and not before!

In '55  
I ran into him again.  
He said:  
„Are you very angry with me  
Comrade?”

And I said I'm not  
because considering the circumstances  
and also considering  
his orders  
what he was ordered to do  
considering that  
he was pretty decent.

Of course, what he was like with others  
I have no way of knowing.

They took me to Fõ utca  
a couple of more times for questioning,\*  
they said  
this time I was free to go  
and also  
to write down everything in detail when I got home  
where and when I met my husband.

Well, I wrote all sort of things for them.

## 7.

Before my husband's arrest  
I worked at State Security  
in Vladimír Farkas's department\*  
I was with the Letter Openers  
in an administrative position  
but under my maiden name  
as Mária Tamáska  
with the rank  
of captain.

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\* There was (and is) a court house in Fõ utca.

\*Vladimír Farkas (note Russian first name): the feared ÁVH (Secret Police) director and son of Minister of Defense Mihály Farkas. At the time in question, though, he was just department head.

They had just introduced a questionnaire  
with 123 questions.

There was no hiding the fact  
that I was Mrs. János Kádár any more.

There was no keeping it a secret any more!

But then  
someone from the Institute for Party History  
comes to see me the other day:  
„We interviewed Vladimír Farkas  
and he said Kádár’s wife worked  
under him.”

Big deal!

And hundreds more.

I didn’t have a rich aunt to support me from America.

I had to work somewhere.

Back then the district committee

told you:

you’re going to work in such and such a place

and you went

where you were told.

I worked for  
minister of domestic affairs Imre Nagy  
and also László Rajk  
and János Kádár

then Sándor Zöld\*  
but he shot himself  
and his family too  
into the bargain.

What can I tell you?

When they arrested my husband  
they kicked me out of my job  
and expelled me from the Party too  
at which I wrote a letter to Gábor Péter's office.

You think he bothered with an answer?

I waited eight months.

Then I changed my strategy  
and sent the letter simultaneously  
to the Political Committee and State Security.

And in both letters

I asked the question:  
what good is it to anybody

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\*The same Imre Nagy who, as a reform Communist, headed the government during the 1956 uprising. After his call for help from the US went unheeded, the Soviet troops moved in, the hard line Communists were reinstated with Kádár as General Secretary of the Party, and Nagy was sentenced to death. – Rajk: first Minister of Domestic Affairs then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rajk was arrested in 1949 to become perhaps the best known figure in yet another episode of the ruthless struggle for power within the Party echelons. – Zöld: ????????

if I can't work?

I make the rounds of the family  
doing the housework  
washing clothes  
minding the children:  
well, what good is that  
to anybody?

I haven't got my working papers  
I can't work  
if they don't want me  
to use my married name  
even then I need papers.

I got what I asked for, under my maiden name.

**8.**

One day  
they put me inside the black car  
and drove me  
to Vágóhíd utca.

We drew up by a gate  
and the man says to me:  
„This is a Toy Producers Co-operative

ask for the President  
he's expecting you."

(I really should remember his name  
because for a time his brother was head of the Gas Works  
and also an 8th district Young Communists like me  
but I can't.)

I go inside  
I sit and wait at the gate keeper's booth  
I light a cigarette  
I offer one to the old gate keeper  
who asks me: „Are you an outworker, mam?"

Because as it later turned out  
there were people like that there  
who worked for them at home  
it's these people they called outworkers.

I was assigned to the teddy bear section.  
We made dolls, teddies,  
and the like.

When the first lunch break came  
they looked at me  
as if I were  
from another planet.

But I didn't care!

I put everything down in my CV:  
how my '37 Party membership was revoked  
the time I worked for State Security,  
in the rank of captain,  
until I got kicked out of there too.

During lunch break  
so I wouldn't have to talk to them  
I read the paper: the Magyar Nemzet  
and before long  
I worked my way up  
and became a useful member of the labor force.

The place was full of  
tradesmen's wives and merchants'  
and Horthy officers' wives who worked there.

By then they were better at their work than me.

They didn't trust me at first  
they thought I was spying on them  
until one fine day  
I said:  
„Listen to me, all of you:  
sending someone from StateSecurity to inform on you  
would be far too expensive

don't you thing?

These are just children's toys,  
not exploding teddy bears."

At which they had a good laugh and **took me in.**

**9.**

In '53 or '54

I wrote another letter to State Security  
because I had a talk with my brother  
god damn them

we have the right to know. We have the right.

I work

I keep my mouth shut

I take everything lying down  
it's time they said something!

I wouldn't divorce him

though they sent you know, „those” men after me.

Their Errand Boys, that's what we called them.

At times they were waiting downstairs already

one on one side of the street

one on the other.

They tried to explain to me

it was time I thought of my career!

Six or eight weeks after the mass arrests \*

for instance, one of them showed up with: „Just look at the wife of secretary of state for domestic affairs Jóska Veres she’s already remarried.”

Terrible!

I told him:

„I do not have a lover on the side  
only my husband  
I never did  
and I never will.”

The very idea!

And I told my State Security man  
to go to hell!

**10.**

In July of ‘54

Erñ Gerñ\* sent for me.

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\*

\* At the time Gerñ was Minister of State.

A messenger from State Security  
came to Doll Repair  
at 9 in the morning he brought a letter:  
I'm to be in Parliament by 11.

I rushed home to change.  
I didn't want Gerő feeling sorry for me!

I took off for Kőbánya\*  
and back by bus  
but five minutes to eleven already  
I was in Parliament  
changed into new clothes.

I go in to see Gerő  
he stands up, comes over to me and says:  
„You wrote me a letter last week  
because last week  
I was the minister for domestic affairs.  
Accordingly, I want to be the one to inform you:  
the accusations against your husband  
being a Yugoslav spy and police informer  
have no basis in fact.”

And I say: „Well, then, what are his prospects?”  
„The case is still open,” he says,

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\*The dreary outer district of Budapest inhabited by the poorer members of the working class.

„so nobody knows how long  
it will take. Not even me.”

That’s all there was to it.

Then another man from State Security  
showed up at the co-op:

„Today at noon  
is your chance  
to talk to him.”

By then my colleagues were having their little fun:

„Are you going to have  
some nice young officer  
visiting you from now on?”

Well, and I just said to them:

„Yes, isn’t he handsome?”

I never told them my husband’s name.

If they want to find out  
let them go to Party Headquarters  
and ask!

At the jail

I had to ask for Major Szalma.

I took my husband raspberries in a small plastic box,

but they went through that too  
with a fine-tooth comb.

Then I had to go upstairs.  
I was told to sit down in a certain room.

My husband entered  
all skin and bones.  
He greeted me, he kissed my hand.

But  
good lord  
that was the year  
when we had our share  
there was even a floor!

My poor husband  
they let him get a shave  
and a haircut, they let him get dressed, go through inventory,  
and only when he was finished with all that  
only then did they bother to tell him  
forget it:  
there's a flood.

And when he was still not at home  
the following day at noon  
I ran out of the co-op  
found a phone booth

and called Vladimír Farkas.

The truth is we got on very well.

I have no idea

what they were up to in the evening or at night

because I worked the „day shift”

but as far as I’m concerned

I got on with him.

And I think, he with me.

I said to him:

„I’m Mrs. Kádár

my husband was supposed

to be released yesterday.”

He said

he doesn’t know anything,

he’s been off the case

for some time.

A couple of days later

I was already in bed

because I was an early riser

when around nine, nine-thirty

they came knocking on the door!

I go see:  
well, there stand Kádár  
and also Major Szalma.

But why did they bring him home at this late hour of the day?

Kádár walks through the door,  
at which I:

„Oh,”

I say

„I even called

Comrade Vladimír Farkas

to ask about you.”

And my husband says:

„He can go kiss my ass”.

Major Szalma scurried off  
without so much as a how-dee-do!

He even forgot to say good bye.

## **11.**

So then

poor thing

he was home at last.

I went and bought him a cheap  
two-hundred-eighty forint linen suit  
so he wouldn't have to walk around  
in the dark suit I got him for his trial.  
And also a pair of shoes  
instead of the heavy rough pair  
he wore in prison without laces.

We spent days looking.

He waited for me at the far end of the co-op  
then we rushed up and down the Körút  
but it was well into evening  
before we found him a proper pair of shoes.

Right away Rákosi wanted him  
to go for a „physical”  
but he said in so many words  
he's not going for any sort of  
„physical”, thank you!  
They should send him on a vacation first,  
they can always „examine” him later.

So we went to a place near Balatonfüred  
for a month, to Arács, I think it was,  
to the Brázia Villa.

One day we decided

to visit Siófok,  
my brother's two children were in camp  
in Siófok.

We were about to set off  
when the loudspeaker came on:  
„Mária Tamáska and her husband should not get on the boat!”

Well, a fine thing!

We got out of line, because there was a line there too.  
My husband says: „A fine state of affairs!  
Now I'm the husband of Mária Tamáska.”

But by then István Kovács  
the witness at our wedding was there  
since then Rákosi's right hand\*  
he came over saying he'd take us to Siófok  
on his motor boat.

„What brings you here?” my husband asks.  
„The Old Man gave me permission  
to find you,” Kovács says.

Then when we reached Siófok  
people started recognizing Kádár

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\*Kovács:

at the Foundry Summer Home, for one.  
He got invited everywhere.

In the end we never made it to the camp  
we had lunch someplace  
then Kovács took us back  
to Arács.

He talked about all sorts of things  
then suddenly he said:  
„Kádár, what would you say  
to a game  
of chess?”

Then after my husband  
beat him the second time  
he stood up: „Intellectually,  
I see, you're as fit  
as a fiddle.”

He was relieved. He could go file his report.

## **12.**

When he was released from prison  
he didn't get back his overcoat even.  
But he kept at them until finally

they found him one.

The coat, he saw right away, was not his.

For one thing, it was far too short.

Half his arm stuck out from the sleeve

and it didn't even reach his knees,

in short, he cut a comical figure.

When he showed up with it

I said right away:

„My dear, this coat belongs to Kállai.”\*

And wouldn't you know, one evening, a couple of nights later:

he says: „Kállai was here.”

„What do you mean?” Because

we didn't socialize much at the time.

My husband called him up and told him:

come on over, I want to talk to you.

Then as they were talking he reached

in the closet and brought it out and gave it to him

saying, try it on, it might fit

– and it did!

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\* Kállai: one of the four most powerful men in the country. In 1951, when he was Minister of Foreign Affairs and Kádár Minister of the Interior, both men were arrested in the ongoing, ruthless struggle, etc., etc., etc.

At first Gyula was flustered  
because it reminded him of his old coat,  
the one before his arrest, but he was afraid to say.  
„Go on, Kállai, take it back,” my husband said to him,  
„they gave it to me, but it’s too small –  
go on, take it back...”

That’s how it happened.  
We laughed at it for years.

### **13.**

Those who know us well  
know perfectly well  
the conditions  
under which we lived.

There’s no luxury here now  
nor was there, ever.  
My husband would not stand for it.

Real estate, a summer place – the very idea!

But he loved nature all the same.  
Grass trees and the like.  
Even as a little boy he loved the fields

when he minded the sheep.

When he went out for a stroll  
you just had to say  
to him:  
when you hear the noon bell chime turn back!

Let those bells chime as late as can be,  
or chime for a long time...  
this is what he often wished.

He didn't go hunting as often as he would have liked.  
But whenever he could, he'd read about it.  
He loved hunting diaries and detective stories.  
Everybody bought him those, not just me.  
He'd read detective stories in the evening, before falling asleep, usually.  
„It's like taking a sleeping pill,” he used to say.

But he also liked Gyula Illyés.\*

## 14.

We once had our own car.  
But we didn't even buy that, but Khrushchov's wife.  
It was a present to us from Nina Petrovna.

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\* Illyés: the popular and highly respected writer and poet of humble origins, and proud of it.

We hardly ever used it.

We realized

we didn't need a car.

For thirty-thousand forints we sold it to the State.

That was the going price.

As for the furniture

we practically bought it piece by piece.

Some at the second hand shop

on the installment plan

this was after my husband

got out of jail.

There's also a TV.

I don't know what sort of set it is.

I think it was a present for my husband.

They even installed it, there's the plug, see?

It's not even plugged in. Who needs it.

On the other hand, almost all the old photos are gone,  
taken by State Security.

Now, see? That's a loss.

Whatever is left, it's all still here.

15.

He had two half-brothers  
they lived a village  
near Kaposvár.

He first met them in the fifties.  
Three farmers' co-operatives were consolidated,  
and my husband was invited.  
I remember him saying  
he can't go to that village without  
looking up his father and the boys.  
Old man Kertész, you see, lived in that village.  
That was his father's name.

When he came back I asked:  
what could you talk to him about?  
It wasn't easy,  
he said.

That's when he saw him first, as a grown man.

They talked about things like  
how is your health,  
and the like,  
was the harvest good, the livestock.

But politics – they steered clear of politics.

My husband finally

just said:

„In the villages, at least, there’s order, still We ate crackling scones there and drank wine, but the women folk stood on by with folded arms, though I told them to join us, sit down, but no, they just stood by and when it was time, they waited on us.”

I asked:

is that what you want me to do?

Of course not.

It’s just that he couldn’t help noticing how the villagers kept to their ways.

The women would not sit at the table.

## **16.**

On October 24, 1956

he called home from Parliament

and advised that I shouldn’t stay in the apartment.

That's how I ended up moving to Emil Weil's family\*  
on Istenhegyi út.

Mrs. István Friss and Mrs. Zoltán Fodor were also in hiding there.\*

On October 28th or 29th he came to see me,  
he came in a tank and spent maybe half an hour there  
we had a good laugh  
he looked so comical  
in that combat helmet!

On October 30<sup>th</sup> he called again:  
I should visit Imre Mező\*  
at the Rottenbiller Street hospital  
because what happened on Köztársaság Square\*  
concerned my husband very much  
that's why he asked.

The doctor didn't want to let me in.

---

\* „Emil Weil (1897-1954): physician, winner of the Kossuth Prize; fighter in the Hungarian Working Class movement ... who took up arms for the betterment of the living conditions of the working class.” (*New Hungarian Lexicon*, 1962)

\* „István Friss: Marxist economist, member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party; from 1954 director of the Institute for Economics Research. Parliamentary representative. In his studies he treats the relationship of political economics under Socialism and Socialist economic policies...” (*New Hungarian Lexicon*, 1962)

\* Mező: member of the Party's Central Directorate from July, 1956, he was killed on October 30<sup>th</sup> when the revolutionaries stormed the Party headquarters on Köztársaság Square.

\*

He said not to touch the bed, even,  
because the smallest movement could be fatal.

I was the last person Mezõ talked to  
before he died  
but all he could say was:  
„tell Kádár  
to take care of himself.”

Then I went  
to the so-called Interior Hospital too  
because my brothers had disappeared  
maybe they're there  
(as it later turned out  
they were all right)  
but in the meantime it had grown late  
and I didn't want to go home any more.

All those women  
at Emil Weil's scaring each other half to death!  
They were all afraid for their husbands.  
No wonder.

So I made up my mind  
and looked up Panni Vajda  
who took me under her wing way back  
when I started at the co-op.

She was still glad to see me.

Next day, on November second,  
towards evening a civilian showed up at Panni's  
with two policemen: I was to go with them  
to Parliament.

I had just come back  
from town  
and since it was pouring outside  
I was soaked to the skin  
I had to take my clothes off.

My stockings, too,  
were hanging on the line  
and since I didn't have another pair  
I had to put  
those wet stockings  
back on again  
that's how I rushed off to Parliament.

Where soon as I showed up they asked:  
where is my husband?

„You're asking me?! What a laugh,”  
I say, „how should I know  
when I haven't seen him for days

the last time I spoke to him was on October 30<sup>th</sup> by phone!”

Those who had been his closest associates  
were now asking me  
after his whereabouts!

That was way over my head.

Him and Münnich\* leaving Budapest  
and joining the Soviet forces  
this he never mentioned to me.

But never mind.

I'd seen a thing or two in my day  
but then I just roamed the corridors  
of Parliament.

Because after they questioned me  
they kept me there  
they pressed a machine gun in my hand  
and said, from now on I'm a member  
of the Parliamentary guard  
and assigned me  
to a look-out post.

---

\* Ferenc Münnich: Minister of State, Central Committee and Political Committee member, in 1956 he helped to put down the revolution and to reorganize the Party with Kádár at its head.

I tried to tell them  
that I couldn't handle a gun  
I never had such a thing in my hand before  
but one of the rebels screamed at me:  
„In that case, it's high time you learned,  
you'll need it!”

## 17.

On the early morning  
of November fourth  
I woke up to the sound of cannons.

Since this was nothing out of the ordinary by then  
I didn't bother my head about it  
I got myself a washbowlful of water  
and stripping to the bare skin  
I decided to give myself a thorough scrubdown.

But just as I was about to scrub myself  
with a wet towel  
Zoltán Szántó\* who politically speaking  
wanted to take my husband's place  
all his life

---

\*

came in.

He took one look at me  
froze in his tracks  
turned on his heels  
and ran headlong from the room.

When I was finished  
I tried to find out what was going on  
but whichever room I went to  
it was empty.

After a while Comrade József Sándor\*  
showed up  
and ordered me  
to gather my things  
and follow him.

He handed me over to two young soldiers  
who took me to a building in Akadémia utca  
where they locked me in a warehouse.  
I spent a day there, and a full night.  
I was chilled to the bone.  
Nobody bothered to check on me!

---

\*Sándor: a top Communist who after the uprising became a member of the Central Committee and thus an important Kádár aide.

Luckily I found some furs  
in that warehouse  
I covered myself with those  
when I was lying on the ground.

Later Gyula Köbli's wife came  
who lived near by, just two block away:  
I should join them down in the cellar to wait it out  
but by then  
I had my fill of hiding  
I preferred the empty apartment  
took a bath, got in between the sheets  
and had a nice, long sleep.

And then my husband sent for me!

## **18.**

They took me to Parliament  
in a tank.

What conditions, though!  
The ministers in the Presidential Wing  
sleeping on the floor,  
Sándor Rónay,\* for one.

---

\*

We went to a room where  
the Council of Ministers used to meet before,  
István Kossa\* had some sausage  
because he had fled to Slovakia,  
and that's where he got it.

We also found  
two bottles of mineral water.

With that we celebrated the fact  
that we were there.

Also, November 7<sup>th</sup>\* was approaching,  
which for the Soviet people  
is especially important  
then Kádár took  
the military-technical staff  
to the room adjacent to ours.

From then on, that's where they were stationed.

They were in charge  
of the hot line to Khrushchev.

---

\* Kossa: as Minister of Finance, during the revolution Kossa fled to Czechoslovakia.

\* November 7<sup>th</sup>: the Communist red letter day held in celebration of the Great (Russian) October Revolution of 1917.

Khrushchev would call us  
two or three times a day  
and sometimes even five or six times.  
He was very concerned.

No wonder.

For instance, there was a Soviet and Hungarian soldier  
at every gate  
but once a whole lot of civilians came rushing in  
and a grenade exploded in the cellar.

Meanwhile, upstairs these civilians  
were asking a lot of questions and milling about.  
Were they looking for Kádár, we wondered.

At last, Majkov\* ordered:  
„Have the building of the Hungarian Parliament  
cleansed of all questionable elements!”

Well, they went through that building  
with a fine tooth comb  
and everywhere,  
but everywhere,  
they found firearms.

---

\* Majkov: ?????

In the kitchen  
the bathrooms  
the closets  
behind the drapes  
under the radiators:  
firearms  
everywhere!

Finally, Khrushchev sent  
20 or 30 reliable men from the Ukraine  
who spoke Russian and also impeccable Hungarian  
they were put at the gates  
to keep watch.

In the meantime  
I became my husband's errand-boy.

When a proposal or resolution was ready  
I had to take it to Kállai or Apró\*  
and also all the others.

For a while we got food from the army canteen  
which I served to the staff  
as if we were at home.

---

\* Antal Apró: from 1953 to 1956 vice-president of the Council of Ministers, after 1956, he helped reorganize the Party headed by Kádár. (For Kállai, see above.)

The Russian kitchen boys,  
what they brought up in big cauldrons,  
I was the one to ladle it out.

But first I tasted it. Just to make sure.

The officers even gave me a name  
„Comrade Kádár”  
that was too hard for them to pronounce  
so they started calling me  
Maria Tyimofejevna in jest  
after my father who was of Slovak origin.

I couldn't praise their cooking enough!

„*Ocheny harasho!*”  
„This army food is good!”  
but once soon as I tasted  
some sort of soup  
I collapsed on the spot!

Sabotage.

There was no doctor, of course,  
but they found a Soviet army doctor  
at long last who took one look:  
„get her to a hospital, or she'll die right here!”

It was Khrushchev who took action even then:  
in an hour and a half I was lying  
in the military hospital in Karlovy Vary.  
Already in the plane  
they pumped my stomach!

I lay in that hospital  
for weeks.

## **19.**

After 1956  
Hungary became isolated  
our prestige at the UN  
having hit an all-time low.

Then along with the representatives  
of other socialist countries  
Khrushchev took my husband  
to New York with him.

They crossed the ocean on a Soviet boat  
the result of which was  
that the rest of the party  
were out of commission for days.

They were all sea-sick

or whatever,  
only Khrushchev and Kádár  
showed up for dinner every night.

As my husband said:

„I had to do my bit  
for the Nation.”

Still, sometimes after lunch he'd feel queasy too  
Khrushchev, you see, had a huge appetite  
because during the famine in the Ukraine  
he was the chief there, but he wouldn't eat more either  
than the regular allotment  
and also his first wife  
who died of starvation in the end.

That's when they got to be friendly with the Old Man.

## **20.**

My husband and Josip Broz Tito  
also grew very close  
despite certain political differences  
until in the end they invited us both  
to vacation with them on the island of Brion.

Tito and Jovanka

were very pleasant vacation company.  
We were never bored for a moment!  
Tito drove all the vehicles himself  
from the electric tricycle to the motor boat  
driving  
that was his hobby.

He even took us to Devil's Island  
a veritable south-Slav paradise with .....tropical plants!  
We visited the enchanting zoo too  
put there for Tito's benefit  
a number of times.

They lived the good life, no doubt about that.

Jovanka had some of her clothes made by Klára Rotschild.\*  
Once she went to Váci utca for a fitting personally  
but generally Klára would go up to Belgrade  
to discuss the style.

I was not a good customer,  
because even though I'd show up at Klára's  
now and then  
even then I'd take my own fabric  
not to mention

---

\* Until her death in the late 70s, Klára Rotschild managed an exclusive dress shop (hers, but that was before it was nationalized). It specialized in made to order clothes and was located on Budapest's equally exclusive Váci utca. (It is still there.)

the lining.

## 21.

In '77 we got to go to the Vatican.

Some people were against it,  
for instance, an under-secretary of state  
at the Foreign Ministry:

„Why bother?”

But my husband said:

„Since we're there anyway, it's common courtesy  
to see the Pope.”

It was my first time in Rome.

Kádár's too. We were both very excited,  
We had no idea what to expect.

The Papal Chamberlains planned a thirty-minute audience  
but when my husband was still inside and an hour had passed  
the Guards grew more and more concerned:

„What are His Holiness and Kádár talking about?”

First my husband went in  
to see his Holiness  
then right after him me

the rest of the delegation were allowed in only then.

Paul the Sixth was very nice to us.

He addressed some words of greeting to me which I returned likewise after which he offered me a chair and I sat down.

The Pope was on top sitting on that huge throne-like chair of his with us seated one step below the rest listened to his speech standing up.

Then we exchanged presents.

We took a figurine by Margit Kovács\* with the inscription: Madonna and Child. Kádár received a lovely little etching from the Pope.

It showed Peter and Paul.

---

\* Margit Kovács's terracotta figurines were much sought after – and thus difficult to find – in Hungary. Minister of Culture György Aczél, who also liked Kovács's works, declared them national treasures.

22.

His daily routine was like this:

I got up at seven-thirty  
knocked twice, and he called out,  
„Hi!”

or

„Good morning!”

We had breakfast together  
but all his life he was a small eater  
toast, scrambled eggs or soft-boiled eggs.

We kept hens  
fifteen  
he threw them the leftovers  
bread  
and potato peels  
from the terrace.

Soon as they saw him out there, they came running.  
They knew  
that if they saw him  
they'd get fed!

In short, we had fresh eggs every day.

He'd only eat eggs

that were freshly laid  
okay, they laid it yesterday,  
then it's good enough to eat this morning.

On the other hand  
we never killed the chicken  
because he wouldn't eat  
their meat.

After we had them  
for three years, we'd  
exchange them for new ones.

They'd laid all their eggs by then.

The young men, the guards  
who were on duty  
in the morning, they fed the hens  
and also gave them water.

Also, in the evening, they were the ones  
to lock them in the roost.

## **23.**

Before his major surgery  
my husband went voluntarily

to the „chief health inspector”  
or as he used to call him  
„the Professor General”.

He said to him:  
he’s finding it more and more difficult  
to use his right hand  
which is a hindrance in his work.

Something’s got to be done.

Naturally, this was no job  
for an internist.  
A specialist had to be called.

Finally, he virtually couldn’t barely use his hand any more.

His illness, it’s called  
aponeurosis.

It refers to the layer of tissue  
which holds the muscles together,  
and the illness is the shrinking  
of this tissue.

During his hand surgery  
which lasted over two hours  
his right hand was kept under three atmospheres of pressure.

1.33 kilograms of pressure on one square centimeter!

But by then it was too late.

However, since he knew  
that after his operation  
he would be condemned to inactivity  
he insisted on taking care  
of certain things first.

For instance, Mrs. Thatcher.  
He wanted to meet her first.

Also, November 7<sup>th</sup> was coming up, again!  
The reception at the Soviet Embassy.  
He wanted to be there as well.

Because, let's face it,  
if he's not there  
that could give grounds  
for gossip.

And so the operation was repeatedly postponed.

After his major address of April 12 '89\*

---

\* A reference to Kádár's last speech before the Central Committee.

he didn't go to Party Headquarters again.  
He said a thing or two there, take it from me.  
Afterwards he was made to resign  
including his office as president.

Why?

Some said  
what's needed  
is an active president  
others  
that Imre Nagy's funeral is coming up\*  
and the Party  
wouldn't survive it  
if at the time of the funeral  
János Kádár  
is still president of the Hungarian Communist party.

I went to see Grósz\* personally about this.

I said to him:  
„Look. It's like  
when old Aunt Mari  
who for fifty years

---

\* Sentenced to death because of his role in the 1956 revolution, in 1989 Imre Nagy was reinterred. As the speeches were delivered in front of his bier, an entire country knew that it was the end of an era.

\*Károly Grósz: the man who was slated to replace Kádár as First Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party.

served as maid to the Esterházy  
or the Baron Kohn's\*  
and gets dismissed  
because not only is she old  
but she broke a piece of the dinner china  
into the bargain  
and that's the last straw!"

He was one big ass  
I am sorry to say!

For fifty years  
he did what he was told  
this is not  
the thanks he deserved.

They even accused him  
that he couldn't read very much any more  
of what was put in front of him  
no wonder  
when they underlined everything with  
all sorts of colored pencils first!

And not just  
some key passages, no,  
but full paragraphs

---

\* The Esterházy were aristocrats, the Kohns Jews.

one with red  
another with blue  
a third with god only knows what.

The letters jiggled in front of his eyes!

To tell you the truth  
he had cataracts on both eyes  
but he never went to work  
without reading the paper first  
cover to cover.

I used to tease him:

„You even read the classified ads, don't you?"

Of course in the end I'd have to read to him.

Sometimes we also talked about how  
now that we're free as a bird  
how pleasant it will be  
to walk around town at last  
wherever we want  
we can go on a picnic  
or the movies  
anywhere  
and as often as we like.

At such times

he was happy for a while  
but then out of the blue  
he'd have a sudden change of mood.

When I reprimanded him:  
„Don't shout, dear, don't talk rude”  
he'd say:  
„It's not me talking, it's my illness!”

Then one morning he suddenly said:  
„Get dressed,  
fix yourself up.  
We're leaving this house.”

And I said:  
„Wait  
let me pack  
a few things at least.”  
And he said:  
„We don't need anything!”

In the garden  
I tried to hold him back:  
„What do you say  
dear  
to some lunch first.”

And so I managed to talk him

into going back inside.

It wasn't easy.

Then next

he asks me:

„Listen, did those people just expel me, is that it?”

And I say to him:

„No dear

you didn't get expelled from the Party

just your post as president and also

your membership in the Central Committee

they relieved you of that.”

Whereupon he gave me a look:

„Listen, is this still the same

party

I joined?”

He wouldn't go to the hospital.

He said:

„If they make me

I'm going to beat my head

against the wall!”

And I thought:

as long as I can manage it

let him stay.

After all, this is his home.

He can do in it what he likes  
he can go to bed, or get up  
when it suits him.

Also  
he can walk around the apartment  
and the garden.

**24.**

In the end, he spent just four days in the hospital.  
Till then he was in his own home all the time  
though he was very weak.

He wouldn't eat.  
„What's the use of living?“ he said.  
Also, he had trouble breathing.

Towards the end he kept saying  
how he's not to blame

that Imre Nagy died\*  
or was killed  
or whatever  
murdered.

He asked:  
isn't he invited to the funeral?

And I said: no.  
Because he never got notified.

And he says:  
„But the funeral is today!”

And I say:  
yes, I know.

And then they took him away.

---

\* See previous notes on Nagy, who was sentenced to death by the new Kádár government because of his participation in the revolution of '56.