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### THE LETTER

The story you are about to read is true. Names have not been changed; no individuals need to be protected, because most of them are dead. This is the remnant of the story of our parents, whom we left behind when we emigrated to the USA in 1939. Until America's entrance into the war in 1941 we had been able to correspond with each other and had kept our hope alive toward reunion after the war. At war's end in 1945, when we failed to hear from them, we gave up hope. Then, in 1948 we received the following letter, written in diary form on sheets of toilet tissue by our mother during her imprisonment. After their prison sentence had been served and they were free they lived in Budapest until an unknown date in 1944-45 when the Nazis overran Hungary and what happened further, how and where they met their end is unknown. Before they were caught the second time, however, they gave the diary-letter to one of our cousins. She and her family fled when the Nazis came, and returned after the end of the war, to find their home ransacked and plundered. An old rickety little table was left, and in its drawer was this letter, which the cousin then sent to us. The following is a translation from the German language. (It took twenty-one years to complete it, so great was our pain each time we tried . . . .)

Budapest, March 29, 1944

#### My Father's Prayer

Beloved children -- Every day I pray approximately the following prayer:

Great God, there Thou art above the suns, above the stars there Thou art everywhere and also where our beloved grandchildren, where our

beloved children are, where my beloved wife is and there Thou art with me: Answer our prayers, give us the grace, unite us in life, health, freedom, love, happiness and contentment. Let assaults and all plans of all our enemies become nought, everywhere and everyplace. Amen.

God bless you my beloved, your loving father.

Budapest, May 27, 1943

### The Letter

My beloved dear children:

My heart will not give up hope that we shall see each other again in happiness, and that we, my beloved children, will be able to yet tell you all this with joy, and in person. However, in the event that cruel fate might not permit us to come to you I am writing this all down, as far as I can remember, so that you at least might know everything, from the time on when we no longer were able to write to each other.

The last letter we received from you was from October 1941, and we still received it after war had been declared (by America) and we still wrote to you in December (1941 ed.).

Purely on the surface, at that time, nothing had changed for us. We still had our fixed income, in contrast to the unfortunates who had to exist from the breadlines and donations. We still had – in our own flat -- the use of two rooms and the bath for ourselves, whereas most others had to exist four and five crowded into a terrible room. We always had enough to eat; truly good kind friends, among them also those downstairs in the house, faithfully supplied us with all we needed. So well, in fact, that we often, almost daily, could afford to have a guest for the noon meal. There were Lotti, Helen, Cilly, Mrs. Schmetterling and once week also one of your father's poor friends to supper. When your father had to go shovel snow he also brought several hungry, freezing and exhausted people who lived too far to be able to go home for lunch. We were always supplied with sufficient fuel, so that we were able to always have heat -- even to the tune of a bath twice a week, with enough left over to help out a few of our friends with coal and coke. Others had to wait until the end of March before they were able to get a bit of fuel. We almost always had some guests who were

glad to be able to warm themselves a bit. In that terrible time all stuck together more closely, the shared great suffering brought all closer. We got along well with our tenants. As a matter of fact, we got long exceedingly well, while many of the others, forced to live crowded together, on top of it all quarreled, thus making their desperate live yet harder to bear.

Every Tuesday we had company. The guests came for Conversational English. They at least felt comfortable for these few hours with us as, far as one could feel comfortable at all at that time. Our dear new friend Anny Weiss came always to these gatherings, and we learned to really like her -- she proved to be a true friend in that difficult period. Mrs. Knoll and her brother-in-law came (her husband had committed suicide in the summer already). Then there came Lotti, Mrs. Schmetterling, Liesel there came Lotti, Mrs. Schmetterling, Liesel, Liesel Stein and her husband; occasionally Mrs. Kolban, Mrs. Shapira, so that at times we were ten to twelve people. We had plenty to keep us busy -- we learned English, cleaned house and straightened everything up nicely, washed everything up nicely, washed our laundry together, cooked together. Mornings Papa always went marketing and too Csibi-Darling (the dog) along and every afternoon we went for a walk. We also still had sufficient clothes, shoes and underwear, and we even had been able to shop for few things for our much hoped-for and dreamed-of trip to you, my beloved children.

Thus, as I said before, superficially, things were still bearable; but inside, we were just as finished as all the others. As long as there was left even glimmer of hope to yet get out still bearable; but inside, we were just as finished as all the others. As long as there was left even a glimmer of hope to yet get out, one was able to hang on, but with the declaration of war, when all hope was lost to get to you, we were completely broken. All around us the despair, the many suicides. In that time the poor wretches, uncle Jacob, Gisa and Alice jointly committed suicide. Poor Anny committed suicide -the poor wretch-, uncle Jacob, Gisa and Alice jointly committed suicide. Poor uncle Arnold, just had to go away; Louise and Schani were already gone (deported) and we never heard from them anymore, thus could no longer

send them anything nor write to them. Unceasingly the transport went to Poland; often (the people of) whole houses, streets and districts were taken at once. We lived in uninterrupted terror and fright, and no more legal way to escape.

During the time your poor father lost so much weight and became so thin, that this definitely made me make up my mind, for his sake to undertake any hardship and not to be a hindrance to him in any way, come what may. Now the only salvation was to get out illegally, either to Italy or to Hungary. Of course, we first thought of Meran and began to investigate. You can imagine, that then everybody everywhere had this in mind, and one really did no longer speak of any other topic. With lots of money, it was even then still possible to get to Switzerland, but many who had the money no longer had the courage to go. One heard much that was bad, how guides robbed the poor wretches and left them stranded. Also, that many suffered frozen hands and feet. It was deep winter then. Thus, much was discouraging. It was a difficult and real problem. For us it was even harder yet. We, although we had the courage and the determination, did not know anyone and we had no money. However, in spite of this we did not rest. We were a group of people, among them also the Steins, who wanted most to go to Italy, but it was winter and the roads all snowed in over the mountains, and the other possibility with lot of money naturally totally useless for us.

Now, Papa, shopping, had met a Hungarian, and since she also learned English, he invited her to our Tuesday Conversational English Hour. She mentioned, in passing that she really could have gone to Hungary long ago, that she had many friends there who had been taken over the border by a dependable guide she knew, and that he also had taken one of her relatives safely across. Since Italy was so completely out of reach then, it seemed to us like hint of fate, to have learned thusly of a dependable and honest guide, thus we decided to go to Hungary. We had no more time to wait. The deportations had again commenced at an increased tempo; night and day people were hauled away and they could come after us any minute.

It is hard to describe now, how we sold the few things we still had, the everlasting packing and repacking: we had to be constantly

ready for Poland, then again for flight, because it had been agreed, that we must be ready at a moment's notice to go with our guide. This tension and constant worry and anxiety -- even now that I am putting this down on paper, every single nerve in me jangles. And in that time we experienced the great joy of real selfless help from a few good friends. Everything had to be done in complete secrecy, not even our tenants must get an inkling of our plans. We wanted to take Lotti along, but she was too scared to go, could not make up her mind. Finally the day arrived when "Joscibacsi" -- and to this day we do not know the man's real name -- came to pick us up. At 6:00 pm we left our flat, accompanied only by our friend Anny, who however only came down to the house entrance, where she then stayed with Csibi-darling. I still can see her, waving to us into the streetcar. She had the task to go back to the flat and tell our tenants, that we might not spend the night at home. Everything had to be so arranged that in case of something going wrong we would not be found out. Now, with the streetcar, still with the yellow star on (our persons) up to the subway, where in the station restroom we hastily ripped off the yellow stars, then by subway to a prearranged stop where Grete's husband waited with our knapsack. We continued minus the yellow stars, but in fear of being recognized because we no longer were permitted to use public transportation, and if somebody would recognize us and report us, it would mean Poland for sure. We continued with streetcar No. 18 to the Meidling depot, where Joscibacsi waited for us on the outside. The waiting at the station -- I wore head scarf and glasses and Papa wore his -- then the trip on the train, again trembling for fear of meeting someone who would recognize us; but all went well, and at about 9:00 pm we arrived at the station from where we then had to continue on foot, and it started to get pretty rough then.

It was drizzly, clouded over and windy. First of all, we had to get away from the station as fast as possible. The way was across wet fields, still soggy from snow. Our guide, very nervously constantly drove us -- Papa with the heavy knapsack -- all our earthly possessions; me with a briefcase and my purse. The anxiety, the darkness, the nervous Joscibacsi and the horrible road -- it was frightful. Suddenly I got stuck in the mud with one foot and could not go on. Joscibacsi sore,

and threatened to leave me behind; finally with everybody's help I was able to free my foot, but the shoe stuck. By the time I was finally ready again to continue, you can imagine how it was to run on with the wet muddy shoe. Then came a long stretch along the slanting train trestle, always chased, always sinking into the wet snow, and so it went for over two hours, when we finally could slip close to a haystack and Joscibacsi permitted a brief rest. We flattened ourselves against the haystack and ate a bite. The first stage had been reached. But half an hour later he started again to drive us on, still as fast as possible. Right across the fields and the vineyards, always away from the roads so that no patrol should grab us. We were allowed to talk only in very low voice and often had to proceed stooping low. Then we came near a village. We heard the dogs bark. Now we had to circle around the village, often we had to pass certain spots one at a time, and always listening and always alert to any steps (nearby). Papa with his heavy rucksack and I ever so often thought that I could not keep up. And yet, how much more we had to go through yet! But always the one thought that kept us going and kept us on our feet: for our dearest, beloved children! We must -- and thus we continued on. It was already around midnight when we finally came to a woods where our path had a bit more cover. But here there were at times places where we could hardly get through, the thick undergrowth, and then the dry leaves crackled and we had to watch our step more and more carefully. Naturally, here too, we had to avoid the real path, because here it always was dangerous. We were still not at the border and had to hurry; but finally, finally there we were out of the woods. Here now, was the broad ribbon of a highway and across -- finally -- Hungary! We gazed across as if it were the Promised Land. Now we had to be twice as careful. This was the most dangerous spot. The moon was out and therefore that much, greater danger to be discovered and perhaps get shot from both sides. Thus we had to run, one at a time, quite bent over, across the clearing, as fast as we could. Joscibacsi went first, then I, and then finally Papa and at last we were across.

We would have liked to throw ourselves down and kiss the ground, we thought we were already safe; but very soon came the big

disappointment: Above all we had to get out of this danger zone near the border as fast as possible, thus we ran a good way further into the woods. But this was not as dense and much nicer, and finally we were permitted to rest a bit again at a nice place. Though dead tired we were already happier and calmer. During this resting we discovered that we still had the yellow stars on our pockets and we buried them in the ground, then and there. I think I could find the place anytime, I can see it so before my eyes. When we started up again, it was already after one am. Now we did not have to hurry so anymore. We were supposed to get to Sopron not earlier than 4 am, where we supposedly were to be expected. There was now a long clearing in the woods and the path no longer so terribly hard. I, of course, was already very very tired, but the gladness to be across the border buoyed us up. Never in all my life will I forget this road. One could see the road far ahead and the moon was shining. Dear Papa and I held hands as we walked on and when I seemed to be on the verge to faint, we looked at each other, and "Ilse, Susi, Johnny Henry, Lilly, etc." and we could go on. This alone, the thought of you, my dear beloved children, this alone kept us going at that time; And at that time we vowed to each other to hang on as long as our strength would last, not to despair and to keep on going.

Even so, we both almost very quickly despaired: as we talked, we walked out of the woods into the vineyards, and again halted for a brief rest at a small hut. We still had to keep very still and speak only in very still and speak only in lowest tones: occasionally we heard someone whistle, and then we froze for fear that a patrol might be nearby.

Joscibacsi had given us tips on how to conduct ourselves when we entered the city, belves; we entered the city, because if recognized as fugitives we would simply be sent back and that we feared as the most terrible thing. Therefore, he had called in a relative of his, to carry our knapsack and luggage, and we were supposed to clean the mud off our shoes and all traces of the trek through the woods from our clothes; this also was the reason why we were to reach the city near daybreak when other people would be already on the streets. Thus it got to be three AM and we saw the city of Sopron. It was quite an unusual sight for us to see a city all lit up. At about 7 o'clock we were to be at the point where

the man was to meet us. The plan was for us to continue by train (presumably to Budapest, Ed.) as soon as we had recuperated from the trek on foot, because the sooner one could get further way from the border, the better. So, after again being warned to be very careful in the city, and especially keep out of sight of police or Gendarmes, and to try to disappear into a house, but in any event, I was to speak only Hungarian, if in anybody's earshot, but better yet not to be noticed at all. Thus we started, our guides went ahead; it was pitch dark (it was just my birthday, (3/28/43, ed.) As we rose, I could hardly get up on my feet and was in terrible pain when I started to walk. Papa had to lead me and we made only very slow headway. After walking like this for a brief while we noticed suddenly that our guides were longer in sight; we started to hurry, but in vain. We had just come to a crossing and had no idea which way to go. We waited a while thinking they would come back, looking for us. We did not dare to rest and were extremely frightened, in the dark and in an absolutely strange place. When no one came, we decided to go to the city, and figured if they missed us they would surely be on the road to the city also. In despair and upset we went into the city, and no trace of our guides. Meanwhile it had become lighter already; here and there people were walking, and there were lights everywhere. So, you can imagine, every time we heard steps we thought, "Here come our friends", and we started to run, but nothing, no trace. We kept going hither and yon; and then we spied a policeman from afar we immediately turned around and went the other way, and we could hardly think nor speak anymore. We were agreed on one thing though -- before we would let ourselves be sent back, we'd rather die! This in spite of the promise we had made to each other, just a few hours earlier, to hang on as long as our strength would last, because then it all would have been in vain.

We forgot that we were tired, we forgot our despair, and at long last thought to try to find the (headquarters of the) Jewish Congregation, yet we did not dare to ask anyone. Then we remembered that Joscibacsi had mentioned the name of the party where we were headed, but we could not quite remember it for sure. We wanted to call on the telephone, but we had no Hungarian money. Finally we went into a



telephone booth and tried to find a similar name and the name of the street. Meanwhile it was almost 6 a.m. and more people on the streets, so I took my heart in my hands and asked a woman how to get to that street. And we pulled ourselves together and went to that street, but had to wait until the house entrance was unlocked, because we had no money for the caretaker to tip him for opening the door. We had to get off the streets in a hurry because our clothes were mud-splattered and my stockings torn from the woods. Well, we went on upstairs and rang, half convinced to find our guides, when to our greatest surprise a very sleepy man in his pajamas opened the door and gaped at us openmouthed. We begged him to let us in, that we were the party whom Joscibacsi had guided, etc. He let us in, and we found out that he was and we found out that he was a total stranger, who did know any Joscibacsi, etc. God helped us there and then and we hope to God that this man will get his reward for what he did for us. He left us, went and fixed a bed for us and made coffee and only after we were rested and had had some food and were refreshed, did he ask us about all the details; then he telephoned a friend and the two of them then went to find Joscibacsi. You can imagine how we lay there exhausted. After two hours the two gentlemen returned, after finding Joscibacsi, who also had been running about desperately looking for us.

Around noon we then continued our trip to Budapest, after again being fed by them and provided with Hungarian money for the train fare and having cleaned up our muddy clothes and shoes and provided us with some items from our luggage. All this had to be done without arousing anybody's curiosity, because it was strictly forbidden to aid fugitives. Everyone who got caught helping a refugee was himself severely punished and interned. This we had of course not known beforehand, also we would not have decided to come to Hungary. What then happened to us, you may be able to learn from others, because many here already knew about it.

Eventually we found a furnished room, but because we could not register by ourselves, we got into the wrong hands. In Vienna yet, we were told, that eventually we could get legal papers permitting us to stay even though for a short time only, and such a temporary permit

could be renewed and that was we hoped to do. However, as mentioned, we got to the wrong parties and it cost our last money to get some papers which actually only a regular citizen was permitted to carry. In the end we had a very nice room with kitchen and bathroom to share and even a balcony available, but then fate caught up with us. The man who had gotten us our papers was arrested and gave our names, and thus we were arrested on Whitsuntide Sunday of 1942.

It has been now over a year that we have been in prison, where I am now writing this. So far God has protected us and preserved our health, knock on wood. For the time being we are only in pre-sentence investigation and expect to have our hearing in the fall. After getting free we hope to get into a camp and they're with God's help to wait out the war. What we have gone through here and how we are able to bear it all is not so easy to describe. Essentially we are being treated well. After two months, I already received food from the outside; dear Papa, however, not until after eight months. Up to now the physical part of it is bearable. Of course, we both were in the beginning quite brokenhearted and thought that we could not stand anymore. Especially, when Papa was taken elsewhere, I lost all composure and thought my heart would break. I never cursed anybody, but then when I was so completely separated from all those I loved, and found myself in prison, I did curse all, especially those who could have helped us so easily to be there with you, and did not do it! May God reckon with them – he will (He did). All the bitter tears that we cry from our aching hearts, so far from you our beloved ones, may they sear their hearts! And you, too, must never, never forgive them! Since a few weeks ago Papa is back here in the same building and I can at least see him from afar every Friday night at Services. We both are very happy that now at least that much is given us. Dear Papa looks relatively good, and I myself look good, too. But we have aged a lot, we have become very old. My hair is quite gray and my eyes have suffered a lot. Well, may God now help us on. Our only prayer is to see you once again, my dearest beloved and to be able to live with you, even if only on bread and water! Only this one should fate grant us, then we will gladly bear anything until then. In spirit I am with you always and with your darlings and by imagining

them I can bear life without you. If we only could have gotten any news from you. May God grant you a happy life in freedom. May you achieve what my mother's heart can beg from fate for you. My beloved dear children: I shall pray for you, wherever I may be. For your happiness and your life. I kiss and embrace you.

Your Mutti

Budapest, June 17, 1943

My dearest:

Today it is September 9, 1943. Here in prison we have heard of Italy's capitulation. We were supposed to have our hearing today, but it was postponed. Our hearts are full of hope! You can imagine how we feel. May God help us to hold out to the hopefully near end. I always carry this letter on my person; that is why I had to mark this day. We kiss you. We are well.

#### EPILOGUE

In the midst of heartbreak, horror and terror these two beloved people were able to cling to hope and to share the last little bit they had with their less fortunate fellow victims of persecution. The noblest evidence of compassion and man's HUMANITY to man flows from their words, thus giving testimony to the everlasting truth and beauty of love and faith. No marble monument can do them greater honor, although we know no grave where we may mourn them.

Their daughters,  
Ilse and Susi