

Elisabeta: A Remarkable Tale of Hardship, Toughness and Accomplishments

Dear Mommy,

I have to admit that for a long time I didn't understand you. Like that time when I found a pencil sharpener that someone lost outside; I wanted to keep it but you made me take it back to where I took it from. Or later when my brother and I were raucous and you hit us over our heads with your hair brush; which promptly broke in a funny way and we had all burst out in laughter. You pushed us to get the higher education which you so much wanted but was out of reach for you.

We thought you were too harsh, but you actually wanted the best for us; you wanted us to become good, respectable and rule-abiding members of our society. Above all, you gave us a life that was unimaginably better than what yours must have been.

Mom never told us too much about her upbringing because it was too bleak and painful. I was able to glean some remarkable snippets though. Born under dark circumstances in a small mountainside village by the forest, with a creek, a church and an abandoned glass-making factory, Elisabeta (Erzsi as she was nicknamed) was mainly raised by her two aunts. Aunt Jeni was also a neighbour and she featured prominently in her early, formative memories. Elisabeta's mother, herself a single mother to three daughters with no support from anyone and no material means of survival, had to give her in the care of Aunt Lina who lived in a town at some distance. Elisabeta was only 8 years old.

Aunt Lina had two daughters of her own and a husband, so Erzsi was always treated like a housemaid rather than a family member. Starting at the tender age of 8, she had to earn her living. One particular early morning in the fall, the family was heading to harvest the onions that they were growing in their fields as farmers. It was chilly as she was walking barefoot in the dewy grass: "Aunty, my feet are cold". "Don't worry dear, the sun will soon come out and it'll warm you up" - but it never did that day.

When Aunt Lina passed away, Elisabeta asked her uncle for some money to buy herself a dress, to replace the rags that she was wearing. Uncle Dumitru didn't have the money, but instead he offered Erzsi a small plot of land where she grew her own onions for sale. There were no stores nearby back then and travel was slow and tedious, so she bought some cloth from the travelling salesman with the determination of learning how to tailor and to make herself a dress. However, one of the two cousins she was living with found the cloth and snatched it away from her.

All of this was happening while the biggest war in human history was unfolding literally in their backyard. Picture this: as an 8-year old, to see dead paratroopers dangling from their harnesses tangled up in the upper branches of trees. Imagine having to spend hours in a makeshift bomb shelter in the backyard. One day after the bombing had ended, they got out of the shelter and went into the home thinking that they're safe now. 10 minutes later a lone, lost bomber plane had to get rid of the ammunition before the return flight to save weight and happened to drop one bomb straight on top of the "bomb shelter", completely obliterating it. He didn't even target it on purpose.

The famine started toward the end of the war. With men having been recruited (many of them dead by now) and women sometimes displaced by war, the crops had rotted in the fields. Mom remembered that sometimes German soldiers took pity on the children and were giving them small chocolate squares from their food rations. When the tide of the conflict reversed, Russian troops came in and they were confiscating food from the population, to feed their troops. The

door burst open and the soldier barged into the house. Uncle Dumitru placed himself such that his body was in the way if they tried to get to the storage room where they held their meagre supplies. The soldier caught on to the move and threatened Dumitru with his rifle: "You better give me the food right away or I'll kill you on the spot, in front of your children!". The occupation lasted several years and by now you were a teenager, running into hiding every time a Russian soldier was in sight. They had a reputation of doing bad things to young girls like you, and you were determined to avoid Grandma's fate.

You understood instinctively that education will give you opportunities in life, and not only did you put yourself through school the best you could, but you also helped your younger sisters. Sometimes you had to carry Yolanda (Yoli), the youngest one, literally on your back when her feet were hurting from walking the several kilometres to school on foot.

Mom wasn't exactly outgoing and didn't have many friends, but what lacked in quantity in terms of her relationships, was more than made up in quality. She still kept in touch with all the **real** friends that she made ever since school, all her life until a few months ago.

The long, Communist years were filled with hard work on the factory floors, 6 days a week and with very few holidays; handling and machining heavy, cold chunks of steel. You hardened and took it all in stride, even managing to earn awards for worker of the month. Pictures were very rare and expensive in those days, but your most beautiful picture is from one of those award boards. When not doing shift work, you spent long hours in line-ups to buy even the most basic necessities: in the sweltering heat or the bone-chilling cold where your feet were once again freezing.

You met the love of your life, Dad, at the engagement party of your best friend. When you took the initiative and invited Dad to a dance at first he turned you down, even though he liked you, just because he never knew how to dance. But you persevered like you always did, and taught him some simple dance steps to get him going. It was love at first sight, which endured for 62 years. You waited patiently 3 long years for Dad to finish the compulsory military service. There was no wedding per se. The two of you just lined up at the office of the justice of the peace, and when your turn came, you signed the papers and rushed back to work because you took a few hours off. Yes, that's how straightforward "mass weddings" were back in those days. No fuss, no frills, no wedding dress or party.

As a working mother of two, you taught yourself how to cook, bake, to tailor and stitch together clothes for your family along with many other skills that were essential for a successful life. Stoutly, with a steely determination, you raised your kids while also eventually reaching what was considered middle-class. You loved your family so much that you didn't even blink when you had to board an airplane for the first time in your life and despite of a language barrier, all by yourself in unfamiliar environments; you had to cross the great ocean and visit your two sons here in Canada. You didn't think twice when asked to leave behind everything that you've built with your sweat and tears over so many years. You never felt uprooted as long as you were surrounded by family; and you made new, long-lasting friends here too, because that's who you are were.

After a number of years with declining health, even last month at the hospital and again, breaking through a language barrier, you managed to find fans. A young nurse complimented you for your beautiful eyes. A male PSW was so impressed that despite being in physical pain, you always had a bright smile on your face. We can forgive him, for he didn't know who he was dealing with.

Two weeks ago, in the throws of the illness that immobilized your feet and in a few days would take away your ability to speak, swallow and eventually breathe, you told me something extraordinary. You were in a hurry to go to Aunt Jeni to pick up your wedding dress. "Wedding dress?? - I ask". "Yes, it's a busy day. I have to pick it up, put the finishing touches on the seams and get ready for the big night. I don't really feel like partying now, but the priest asked me to be a bride and I couldn't say no to him". At first I had put it down to the more and more frequent hallucinations, but then as I thought about this, it struck me. You see, in Hungarian the word "bride" is a compound word, roughly translating to "heavenly woman" or "woman of the heavens". In her mind, mom was preparing the dress that she never got to have as a child not for a wedding, but to meet God instead.

A few days ago we gathered the family by her bedside and spent a magical evening sharing good memories. Although unable to speak, Mom shared many smiles with us and especially with the other non-verbal person present: her four-month old great-granddaughter who was smiling back as she usually does. Mom always connected well with children; she loved them dearly. After that evening we are all at peace now.

May your feet always feel warm and cosy from now on, our beloved Wife, Mom, Mother-in-Law, Grandma and Great-Grandma!

May God, our Resurrected Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, receive your soul into His Kingdom "where there's neither sorrow, nor sadness nor weeping, but only eternal life". Amen!

Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!