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Csókakő

Csókakő is a beautiful little village at the foot of Vértes Mountain. It is tucked away from the main road, and the top of the mountain proudly displays the ruins of a medieval castle built in the 13th Century. It seemed to make perfect sense to find refuge from the war in this remote little village. Our hosts, E B and his wife I lived at the edge of the village on a dirt road that led to the mountain. E bácsi (Uncle E) was Csókakő's blacksmith; he practiced his trade in the shop located adjacent to the house. The equipment and technology employed in this shop were pretty much the same as one can find in 17th Century Colonial Williamsburg. I still remember the foot-operated leather bellows that was used to pump air to the glowing pieces of iron which E bácsi hammered into their desired shape. But most of E bácsi's work consisted of shoeing horses. There was not a single car or tractor in the village; the farmers used either horses or oxen to perform their work.

This was my very first encounter with life in a village, which was a far cry from what I had experienced before in suburban Újpest. My mother, brother and I were allotted one room of the farmhouse, which had no electricity or running water. We pumped our water supply from the well in the yard, and for sanitation there was the low-tech but always reliable outhouse. Bathing was accomplished by the use of tubs filled with well water. Window screens had not been invented yet (at least not in Csókakő), but there were numerous strips of paper with an adhesive bait (probably molasses) hanging from the ceiling to catch the flies. These fly-torture instruments had to be replaced virtually on a daily basis, because the supply of flies in the outside air was inexhaustible. The horses and cattle in the village also attracted horseflies, and they were more than an annoyance: their sting was most painful. I néni (Aunt I) had one cow in the stable, which provided me with the first insight on how a cow is milked. Csókakő had a communal cow shepherd who herded all the village's livestock to the surrounding meadows for grazing every morning. It was an amazing sight to observe the cows as the herd was passing through the village in the evenings. Each of these creatures recognized her home and knew exactly at which gate to turn into the barnyard. Such superb geographic orientation skills existed already several decades before the invention of the global positioning system (GPS)!

Csókakő also taught me how animals reproduce. I néni had a cat, and one day this pet surprised me by giving birth to a litter of kittens right in front of me. Before that, I had no idea how these natural phenomena occur. I guess I had been sheltered by my mother from the facts of life, and in those days there was not even a source of knowledge like Sesame Street or Mr. R available to a child. I also learned about chickens and their relationship to roosters, and about cows and bulls. One thing I did not enjoy to find out was where the chicken paprikás came from. It was a routine occurrence for I néni to chase after one of her chickens, hold her between the knees, and slice her throat with a kitchen knife. These were shocking and bloody scenes, and it took me a while to enjoy again my mother's chicken paprikás. In my adult life, I feel much more at ease being a vegetarian.

We must have arrived in Csókakő sometime in May 1944, because the school year was almost over. Yet my mother enrolled me in the village's elementary school to finish out the first grade. I am quite sure I attended school there for less than a month before the onset of the

summer vacation. Although I have few memories from Csókakő's elementary school, I do remember attending Mass at the Roman Catholic church on Sundays. Church and religion were most important in my mother's life. She was an exceptionally devout Catholic and had seriously considered becoming a nun before marrying my father. A complicating factor was that my father had been baptized and raised as a Protestant (he belonged to the Calvinist Reformed Church, the second-largest denomination in Hungary). The only way my mother was willing to marry him was by staying in the good graces of the Catholic Church. In order to accomplish that, he was required to sign a "reversal," a solemn vow to raise all offspring from the marriage as Catholics. Since my father was very much in love, he did not have a serious problem with signing that document. Nevertheless, I believe that my parents' diverse religious heritage did present some difficulties in their long marriage. One of these rough spots occurred during a weekend visit of my father to Csókakő. We all went to Sunday Mass together, and on that particular occasion the priest happened to deliver a hostile sermon directed against the Reformation and Protestant religions in general. My father was quite incensed, and my mother embarrassed. They talked to me about this unfortunate happening years later.

Csókakő and the surrounding region is known for its extensive viticulture. Just about every farmhouse has a wine cellar, and the children in the village have the reputation of enjoying wine even before being completely weaned from mother's milk. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that I became drunk for the first (and only) time in my life at the age of seven. It happened on a hot summer day, as I was playing with my new friends in Csókakő. One of the boys carried in his pocket the key to his father's wine cellar, to where we all proceeded to have some refreshments. After some hours of strenuous play, we quenched our thirst with several glasses of delicious homemade wine. This innocent enjoyment did not phase my friends even a bit since they had already developed a healthy alcohol tolerance during their infancy. But the effect on me was quite scary. Within a short time I became very ill with a severe headache and began to vomit. When my mother saw me in this condition, she was scared out her wits, particularly because my friends at first didn't dare to tell her what had precipitated my sudden illness. According to reliable witnesses, my face was pallid and my lips were blue. When the truth came out, it brought some relief for my mother, since there was hope for my survival—even though I may have had a touch of alcohol poisoning.

One of my most pleasant memories from Csókakő consists of enjoying there the most delicious fruit that one can find anywhere. I remember particularly the juicy and fragrant peaches, pears and plums that were so plentiful in the village. Also, I have some pleasant olfactory experiences from frequenting the meadow near the B _ _ s' house. To this day, whenever I smell the fragrance of certain plants or cut hay in an open field, I am reminded of my childhood days in that village.

Csókakő was a very small village, with between 800 and 900 residents at the time I lived there. Almost all of them were farmers who eked out a difficult livelihood from the land by cultivating their fields and vineyards with manual tools such as scythes and horse-drawn plows. Aside from the blacksmith E _ _ B _ _ , there were a handful of other tradesmen, and the sole business in the village consisted of a grocery store, which was owned by J _ _ G _ _ and his wife Róza, who were the only Jews in the entire area. The village intelligentsia consisted of three persons: the priest, the teacher and the village administrator. In our age of computers and instantaneous telecommunication, it is difficult to imagine that in my own lifetime I regularly