



Author and novel presentation and excerpt from the book

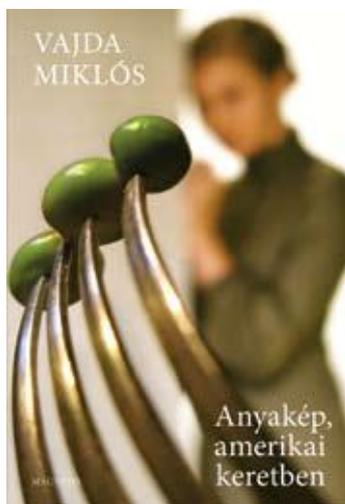
MIKLÓS VAJDA was born in 1931 in Budapest. He is a writer, essayist and translator: his works include a great number of translations from British, American and German authors, and about five dozen plays for the theatre. He was the editor of the review *The New Hungarian Quarterly* until 2005. *Portrait of a Mother in an American Frame* is his first novel which contains his own family story and the fatal history of Hungary in the 20th century.

Miklós Vajda

ANYAKÉP, AMERIKAI KERETBEN (PORTRAIT OF A MOTHER IN AN AMERICAN FRAME)

Memoir-novel, 2009, 207 pages, MAGVETŐ PUBLISHING, HUNGARY
ENGLISH AND FRENCH EXCERPTS, COMPLETE GERMAN TRANSLATION AVAILABLE

„Elegant, reserved but not unemotional. Ironic, but not cynical. So this portrait, or this fragment of an autobiography is the triumph of good taste and the sense of proportions. But above all, it is touching. And we can also add, without further ado, that it’s beautiful.” – Litera.hu



Vajda grew up in a rich family in the first half of the century. His father was a lawyer who represented the Hungarian investments of the Habsburgs. His mother was born into a noble family. Because of the special family background they were fugitives during WWII and after that in the communist era. His father died right after the war and his mother spent years in prison then moved to America immediately after her release. Their son – the Author – stayed in Hungary because he fell in love with somebody else’s wife. Since that time mother and son lived their lives far from each other.

The key figure of the family’s hard years was a beautiful woman, the most famous Hungarian actress around the middle of the century, Gizi Bajor – Miklós Vajda’s godmother. Gizi Bajor died tragically in 1951, murdered by her husband. As the favourite actress of the two dictators Horthy and Rákosi, she tried everything to save her friend, Vajda’s mother and her godson. She hid the whole family during the war and then frequently wrote letters to the dictator Mátyás Rákosi, pleading for her friend’s release (those letters are a supplement to the book). The three of them are the protagonists of the novel – the antagonist is History itself. Vajda as a narrator tries to relate the memories that he has of his mother and understand her years in America, as well as the death of his godmother. The novel is the confession of a grateful son who is telling now what he never told these women.

RIGHTS SOLD TO:

Mali Nemo, Serbia
 Havran, Czech Republic
 Braumüller, Austria

→→→→→→→→→Next page

Miklós Vajda

PORTRAIT OF A MOTHER IN AN AMERICAN FRAME

(excerpt from a memoir-novel)

She stands in the kitchen, in a kitchen, not our kitchen, not the old kitchen, not any of our old kitchens, but her own kitchen, an unfamiliar one, not mine, and she cooks, stirs something. She is cooking for me. That's another new thing, a strange thing. But there she stands, repeating anything I want, anywhere, whatever I happen to want most, at the time I want it. I am still here: she is not. And there are things I do want. But even if I didn't want them she would carry on coming and going, doing this and that, entering my head, calling me, talking, listening, now in delight, now in pain, thinking of me or looking at me, ringing me, asking me things, writing to me as if she were alive. I am insatiable: I am interested in all that is not me, in what is private, in affairs before me and after me, in her existence as distinct from mine, and I try to fit the jigsaw together, but nowadays, whatever she is doing—and I can't do anything about this—is always, invariably done for me, because of me, to me, with me or on my behalf—or rather, of course, for me.

At this very moment I want her to stand there, in that kitchen, stirring away. Let's have her cooking one of those dishes she learned abroad, let her make a caper sauce to go with that sizzling grilled steak. But I often have her repeat a great many other things too: for example, I have recently taken to observing her secretly from my bed as she slowly removes her make-up at the antique dressing table with the great gilded antique Venetian mirror hanging over it, looking into the antique silver-framed standing mirror before her, going about her task in a business-like manner, applying cream with balls of cotton wool, her hands working in a circular motion, efficiently, always in exactly the same way, pulling faces if need be, puffing out a cheek, rubbing her skin then smearing it with, among other things, a liquid she refers to as her 'shaking lotion' and which dries immediately so she looks like a white-faced clown. Then she wipes it off and I fall asleep again. The room is full of mirrors, each of the six doors of the built-in cupboard is a full-length mirror.

My bed is there in her bedroom: my own bedroom is being used by the German Fräulein. Sometimes I wake late at night just as she enters from the bathroom, wearing her yellow silk dressing gown and I hear her as she applies creams and lotions for the night before going to bed, as she moves around, gets comfortable, clears her throat and gives a good sigh before falling sound asleep, her mouth open, contented, exhaling loudly, exactly the way I catch myself doing nowadays.

Or I am watching her at eleven in the morning, as she steps into the car, fully madeup, elegantly dressed, wearing hat and gloves and high-heeled shoes, as she throws back the fashionable half-veil, pulls out of the garage, turns in the drive, takes the left-hand lane—the traffic is still driving on the left—and sets off from our Sas Hill villa in the Buda hills into the

city centre to do her shopping before meeting her friends in the recently opened Mignon Espresso—the first of its kind in Hungary—or at the Gerbeaud patisserie where she might go on to meet my father who sometimes strolls over from his office to talk over their plans for the next day or whatever else is on their minds. Then they come home together to eat. Or I see her in Márianosztra, or possibly, later, in Kalocsa, at the end of the monthly visiting time, led away by a guard armed with a submachine-gun, out of the hall that is divided in half by a partition of wire netting, leaving through double steel doors, overlooked by enormous portraits of Stalin and Rákosi, and I catch a glimpse of her as she is shepherded away in a procession of prisoners and guards, and she freezes for a moment, conscious perhaps of me looking at her, to look back over her shoulder, sensing me standing there, staring at her. The guard's flat cap is covering half her face but her slight squint, her nod, her faint smile and her suspiciously shining eyes tell me more than she could say to me in the fifteen allotted minutes

in the presence of the guard.

Never in my life have I seen her cry. She did not cry when my father died, nor when her sister died. She cannot, she could not, perhaps she never wanted or allowed herself to give direct expression to intense feeling, not in words and certainly not in wild gestures. When either of us was going away on a longer trip she would embrace me and give me a light, brief kiss while gently patting my back by way of encouragement, then drawing a little cross on my forehead with her thumb. That's how we parted in December 1956 at the Southern Terminal, both of us in ruins, like the town itself, silently, crying without tears, since we both knew we would not see each other again for years, maybe never. Nor did I ever hear her sing or hum. Or, and this is another scene I often conjure, the telephone is ringing there, at her home in New York, and she looks at me in confusion, pleading with me once again silently rather than in words, to answer it again because she has difficulty, particularly on the telephone, in understanding the language. Most of the time, of course, the caller is Hungarian. She hardly knows anyone here who is not Hungarian. Nowadays I have her pull this pleading face time and again, as if repeating a scene on DVD; I torture myself with it, it is my punishment. I always regret it but once or twice I rebuke her rather sharply for not having in all that time learned the language properly. But no sooner have I said the words than I am already regretting them: I don't know what has made me say them, made me want to lecture and criticise her, what makes me want to assert my independence, to push her away from me time after time. It's some obscure, as yet-inexplicable urge I have to prod her where she is most vulnerable and often I am unable to resist it. I see she resents it; that I have hurt her; that it saddens her, that it makes her suffer, and that she closes up, but, wisely, accepts the latest rebuke, generously adding it to the rest. Perhaps she understands this instinctively better than I do. Even in the years before prison I was subjecting her to these low tricks; she bore the pain, but maybe, at that time, she could inwardly smile at the thought that her biological destiny had presented her with such a difficult adolescent. Very quickly though we're back to the usual way of doing things. Her patience, her calm, her seemingly endless wisdom in understanding, spring from a source deep within her. But she will never be more demonstrative than this. There are no sudden embraces, no pet-names, no uncalled-for affectionate kisses, no light laughter, no playful teasing, no letting-one's-hair down, no messing about.

Nor was there ever. I myself lack the capacity for at least two or three of those. We live in conditions of withdrawal and reserve, which is not the same as living in solemnity or dullness or indifference, nor does it exclude—not by any means—warmth, kindness, solicitude, gaiety

and a sense of humour cloaked in delicate irony, something I am particularly fond of. I have instinctively grown used, to some degree at least, to seeking what was missing in her in others: ever since I was born I have received generous helpings of them from Gizi, my godmother whom I adore, and, in her simple, modest way, from Fräulein too. Later I look for these qualities in girls, in women, with wildly varying results. But all in vain, since anything you were not given by your mother, indeed anything she did actually give you, will not be found anywhere else. That is my definitive experience. I have been feeling closer to her recently, ever since she died in fact. For a long time I believed she was a simple soul: that she lived by instinct alone, was prejudiced, was incapable of articulating her feelings, impressions and passions, or only doing so when she was forced to and absolutely had to take a position on something. Then I realised I was wrong. She had a complex, rich, many-layered inner life, consisting not only of immediate feeling but of the tastes and ways of thinking traditional to her family and class. Over and over again in my head I replay the most memorable things she said, examining and analysing them, and I always come to the same conclusion. Her opinions were thought through, never spur-of-the-moment or improvised, but properly considered and, when called upon, she could present excellent, concise arguments for them. She had outstanding moral judgment, impeccable taste and her understanding of human character was all but infallible. She was not a snob but open and kindly, never condescending even in the genteel role of 'madam', as she was to the servants for example. She was no bluestocking, of course, but was reasonably well-read. It was thanks to her that I was introduced to Balzac and Dickens in my early adolescence, at a time when I was still reading Karl May and Jules Verne. In her later years she enjoyed reading Churchill's memoirs. She had studied at a girls' grammar school in Arad, her Transylvanian hometown, and, after the Romanian occupation, when her family—a fully Hungaricised landowning family of ancient Serbian origin, some of whose members played important roles in Hungarian history—fled to Pest, she studied the violin with Hubay, as long as they could afford it, which was not long. The photograph of the long-haired, slender, beautiful teenage girl passionately playing her violin—if one can go by such evidence—seems to indicate that she was deeply imbued with the love of music.

When the money ran out, she told me, they presented the violin to a poor, blind child genius. In view of that it is surprising that she never showed the least interest in music later. Might she have taken offence at the hand fate had dealt her? Not one concert, not one visit to the Opera. The programme of classical selections on the radio at lunchtime on Sunday—it was always on while we were eating—represented the entire musical diet of the family. Maybe that was because my father had absolutely no interest in music. From early childhood on I would pick at the keys of my godmother's wonderful Steinway grand—a present from the Regent Horthy—and was strongly drawn to music, but year after year they kept rejecting my plea for lessons, dismissing it as a passing, infantile fancy. It was the only thing they ever refused me. Even today I can't forgive them for it.

But what I chiefly desire is to have her tell me stories: I want her to answer my questions, to annoy her by making provocative remarks, to correct her, instruct her, occasionally to cause her overt pain, to punish her, to let her know that she is my intellectual inferior, to confuse her and mock her and, immediately after having done so, somehow to convey to her how helplessly mortified I feel, to show that I know I have hurt her; but I can't quite say it, cannot quite bring myself to apologise, not even to mention the thing that continues mournfully to rattle around inside me like a sheet of newspaper caught on the railings. Not even when she appears to have put it all behind her. Even today when I dream of these things as have passed between us, I experience such a sharp pang of conscience that it feels like a pain in my chest

and I wake up in a sweat. But she is capable of retaliating, not out of revenge, but in self-defence, and she can upset me too as when, for example, I ask some question about the family and she retorts: fat lot you cared about the family back then! What did her aristocratic ancestry—which is mine too by the way—the aristocracy of which at a certain time in my life I was so deeply and genuinely ashamed, those historical names, matter to me then?

I wasn't even interested in the legendary patriotic general who was executed by the Habsburgs with twelve others at Arad in 1849. And grandmother, who was a baroness, she couldn't help it, what was my problem with her? Today, grandfather's ornate family tree, hand-painted in bright colours on parchment with all the coats of arms going back six generations, hangs on the wall of my flat along with pictures of other famous ancestors.

Right now she happens to be cooking, cooking for me in that kitchen and as she does so, she is half turned to me, in a slightly demonstrative pose as I see it, while merrily chattering on, a pose in which there is no little pride. Her tall slender figure is an elegant exclamation mark in the humble kitchen: see! I can cook! She wants to prove—she is always trying to prove something—that she has learned to cook, and not just any old how. Before, she could manage—when she had to—a soup or two, semolina pudding, an omelette, a slice of veal, a bit of French toast, and not much more. She tied a green-and-white checked apron over her creamcoloured silk blouse, her string of pearls (a cheap yet pretty piece of bijouterie, the real thing having vanished into the Soviet Union), her smart beige herringbone skirt, her stockings, her elegant, narrow but, by-now, not-too-high heeled shoes.

She wore these things until it was time for bed (having discarded the apron of course), wearing the same clothes she wore to the office, not even removing her shoes, which is the first thing I do as soon as I get in, here, as I do at home. Or rather there, as at my home. She can't understand why the shoes bother me.

Slippers are for wearing only at night before bed, or on waking up. During the day it's so non-soigné, she says, Hungaricising the words to sound: *unszoányírt*. I hate this verbal monstrosity with its German prefix and French descriptor domesticated for home use: it looks even worse written down, something like a mole cricket.

I had heard it in childhood from her sisters and my cousins. It must have originated in Arad, presumably inherited from a series of German and French governesses. Naturally, I tick her off, not for the first time, gently but with an obviously annoying superiority, and tell her how many different ways there might be of conveying the same idea in Hungarian, so there is no reason to use a foreign word, especially not one so horrible. She is offended, of course, but does not show it; I am sorry, of course, but I don't show it. We fall silent. We often find conversation difficult in any case or stick to small talk. We are not particularly talkative people, either of us. Not with each other, at least.

The veal with caper sauce turns out to be perfect. I had never tasted it before. Back home whole generations had grown up never having heard of capers. I must have eaten one last when I was a child, when it shimmered in the middle of a ring of anchovy, like the eye of some sea-creature: that's how I remember it. The flavour is familiar and yet entirely new. She is watching me to see how I react to her cooking. Do I like the capers, she asks. I don't let her take pleasure in it: so what if you can get capers in America, you can get anything here we can't get at home.

Occasionally you can get bananas at home now, I answer on the spur of the moment with Lilliputian self-importance, and there were oranges too just before Christmas. One had to queue up for them, of course, I add for the sake of objectivity. Really? She asks in a slightly disappointed voice. In my opinion she should feel cheered by this. Could she have forgotten what a banana or orange means to us there? We carry on eating. I sense that the caper sauce, the grilled veal and the whole baked potato in aluminium foil was a long planned-for surprise, one of many, intended for me. It's a real American thing. Later she lists all the other dishes she can cook, just you see. And it turns out that in her free time she sometimes bakes cakes too, for Hungarian acquaintances, and acquaintances of acquaintances, bakes them to order, for money. So far I only had known—and that was because she told me in a letter—that she occasionally baby-sat, chiefly for Hungarians but also for some American families, and that she had had some amusing evenings with naughty children who did not speak Hungarian, who might, for example, lock her into the bathroom for hours. Most recently she made ten dollars baking a huge Sacher-torte, she proudly tells me. She buys the ingredients and calculates her fee, which, it seems, is the going rate in Hungarian circles, makes up the bill according to the cost of raw materials and often delivers the cake directly to the house. It sometimes happens, she tells me, giggling, that strangers offer her tips. Does she accept them? Of course, why not? I have to take a deep breath. These earnings, taken together with the modest income she has scraped together, have paid for parcels of clothes, chosen with exquisite taste, that would arrive at my home on the Groza Embankment and later for children's toys and clothes at the flat in Vércse Street. And clearly my airfare too, as well as the ample pocket money she has been giving me while here in New York come from the delicious torte as well as the soiled nappies. The People's Republic had, somewhat unwillingly, allowed me five dollars of hard currency for my three-month visit. It is my mother who keeps me; a rather disturbing feeling at age thirty-four. She bakes four or five different sorts of cake, following the recipe in the book of course, and all eminently successful bar the caramel-topped *dobos* layer-cake, she tells me.

Caramel is hard to handle. She pronounces it *kaahraahmell*, with wide open 'aahs', not long, in the regional Palóc mode, but quite short, like the German "a". This irritates me no end, I don't know why. It has been aah, aah, aah all the way—*aahkaahdémia*, *aahgresszív*, *aahttitúd*, right down to *kaahpri* (capers) and *kaahraahmell*—ever since I can remember. And *maahszek* too, the colloquial word for semi-private undertakings. This time I don't stop myself pointing out that this is not a foreign word, but a Hungarian portmanteau, combining 'ma', pronounced 'muh', from *magán* (private) and *szek* from *szektor* (sector). It is a form of what we call an acronym, I add; adds the conceited, repulsive litterateur, her son. She does not answer. She has no counter-argument. She carries on saying *maahszek* and *aahkaahdémia*.

We eat. As a child I used to enjoy watching her as she adjusted the food on her plate with great topographic precision, shifting it here and there with careful, tiny, sweeping movements of knife and fork, like the director on the set of a film, arranging the shots and instructing the cast before rolling the camera. She pushes the meat to the right side of the plate, the garnish being neatly separated and ranged on the left. Turning the plate one way or the other is common, an unspoken taboo. She cuts and spears a small piece from the meat, loads the appropriate amount of garnish on the round back of the fork and so carries it to her mouth. This is a far from simple operation, as may be demonstrated now, since the caper seeds would drop from the fork were they not perfectly balanced there and flattened together a little, did not the speared piece of meat or potato block their escape route, and did she not lean progressively closer and lower over her plate with every bite so that they might find their way

into her mouth all the sooner. When the garnish includes peas, which means that only a few peas succeed in remaining on the curve of the fork behind the meat, that is to say leaving a surfeit of peas on the plate, she is forced to consume extra forkfuls of peas only. But she has a strategy for coping with that too. Using the knife she spears a few peas that will support a few slightly squashed ones behind them.

I have seen others deploy this technique but while they shift and prod the peas about, creating a mess on the plate, she manages to eat them in an undeniably elegant and distinguished manner. It is all done with great skill and grace. She divides the meat, the garnish and the salad so that everything disappears from the plate at precisely the same time, every piece of meat with its due portion of garnish and vice versa. She never leaves any food on the plate. Nor do I. She has lived through the meagre rationing and starvation of two world wars, I only one.

Any sauce or juice left on the flat dish, however runny, is conveyed to her mouth with the fork. One simply can't imagine her using a spoon. She leans forward and makes rapid spooning movements with the fork, turning it up a little so there's still a moment before dripping and thus she can safely steer it into her mouth. This spectacular technique requires close attention and speed: it demands a lot of time and energy, but it works. She turns the obvious pointlessness of it into a display of elegance. I eat the same way myself, ever since being allowed to dine with the adults, as did the German Fräulein, the whole act having made a great impression on her. But to the two of us it is like a private second language, and while we often make mistakes, it is the equivalent of a mother tongue to her, it is what she grew up doing, quite possibly never seeing any other way of eating, only this. My father, whose education had been under quite different circumstances, ate differently. That which could not be speared, he swept into the hollow of the fork and stuffed into his mouth. If sauce remained on the plate and he fancied it he was quite happy to spoon it up, if he didn't fancy it he simply left it. If there were no guests he would dip his bread in, sometimes on the end of the fork but sometimes with his hands! He was allowed to. He was the only one. In my first days at the university canteen I was laughed out of countenance as I was unmasked as a trueblooded bourgeois leftover from the old regime when, out of habit, I started employing my mother's technique. The class-alien aspect of the art must have been painfully obvious, a blind man could see, you didn't have to be a Marxist-Leninist to recognise it. Ever since then, when it comes to eating, my strategies are somewhat eclectic, though lately, since I have been dining alone, I have fallen into decadent ways; she out there, on the other hand, alone, is almost certain to have continued using her fork to spoon the sauce to the day she died.

Silence. She clears the table. She starts on the washing-up while I watch, she having refused my help. Her hair still looks chestnut brown and though this is merely a matter of appearances, there is no grey there. Her face is animated, refined, gentle, very beautiful, her eyes warm though she will soon be sixty.

I understand why in the thirties the Budapest tabloid press referred to her as 'one of the most beautiful women in town'. The ritual of the nightly removal of makeup—though, of course, I am not watching this from bed now as I used to but walking up and down behind her, chatting to her, recounting my round of affairs of the day in New York—is quite unchanged right down to the 'shaking lotion' and the same old movements, it's only the lovely antique mirrors that are missing.

The face that looks back at her from the cheap mirror now is still a feminine face, all attention: she can still take delight in life, is still curious, still wants to see everything. There is no trace in her of the expression you catch on other déclassé immigrants, the cynical hanger-on's don't-blame-me look. She has not walled herself in, become a solitary, she has not been distorted by the enormity and the harsh bustle of the alien world that now surrounds her. She is just the same as she had been in prison when sharing a cell with eight others. Having made subtle enquiries and going by what is around her, I know she is alone, though I had hoped she might have a man in her life. There is no way of asking her this directly, as it is something we never speak about. Grandmother brought up her three girls, she being the youngest of them, to avoid even the most harmless romantic literature, even that in which the attractive, and in every respect impeccable, young suitor makes so bold as merely to touch the innocent maiden's hand in the long awaited last chapter at the point of engagement. She would glue the last pages together or simply cut them out with scissors, believing such episodes to be unseemly. My mother addressed the issue in less radical fashion, in the way that best suited her: it simply didn't exist. My sexual education at home consisted of a single short sentence that I first heard at the age of about four or five when the words first issued from her lips at a time when I lay in bed with some infection, possibly influenza: You are not to play with your pee-pee. That was it. My father said even less. He said nothing. So I became an autodidact in the subject.

Her circle consisted of a few relatives and female friends, all Hungarian, two of them quite close to her. I suspect, I sense, I see, since she practically radiates it, that she lives entirely, exclusively, for me, and that this, for the time being, is as certain as can be. She wants to show me, to buy me, all she can of America, all that is possible to show or buy, whatever is obtainable in intellectual or material terms.

That is because I have chosen to remain there, because I chose not to come with her. That is why she scrimped and saved, that is what she was preparing herself for all her life here. Almost as soon as I arrived the first thing she did was to take me to a medium-range department store and, bearing my tastes in mind, equip me with several suits of clothes, from top to bottom, the way she might a child, that is to say her son, whom she has now had on loan for three months. There were certain items of my own clothing that I had to throw out: she absolutely insisted on that.

There is a photograph of her, some thirty years back in *Színházi Élet*, a magazine for theatre lovers, showing her playing patience with Gizi Bajor, the actress. Gizi is dealing out the cards while she looks on attentively, smoking, turning the signet ring with her thumb the way she used to. And there it still is, miraculously, the golden signet ring, next to her engagement ring: she doesn't take it off, not even while washing-up. When I was a little boy I desperately wanted to have one of those. Engraved into the deep-red ruby, under a five-point crown, a tiny knight-on-horseback galloping to the right holds high his sword, a moustached head, bald save a single wisp, obviously a Turk's, impaled on it. Patiently and wisely she would explain to me time and again that I couldn't have one because it was not mine to possess, because even my father didn't have one.

It hurt me, it infuriated me, it brought me out in a fever: I simply couldn't accept that I was unworthy of it. I, I alone, unworthy! When I could get anything else I wanted! It was the first time I felt the limits of my world and I couldn't understand it, couldn't get used to it. Yet

how fine it would be turning it round on my finger while talking, as she did! To answer questions in a careless fashion!

Several years, some eras later, I upbraid her on account of the ring. Before the *gimnázium* is nationalised in 1948 and I am still at the Cistercian school—but have become an avid consumer of the works of Hungarian novelists, poets, sociologists and historians, most of whom are outside the Church-approved curriculum, and am fervently committed to the cause of equality—I get embarrassed by my mother, not just in myself but before others too, precisely on account of the signet ring she is wearing, which I see as an emblem of feudalism.

She spends her evenings at this time removing, at my stubborn insistence, the embroidered five-point crown above the monogram from the remaining items in her trousseau such as tablecloths, napkins, bed linen, towels, kitchen cloths and dusting rags, and she does it silently, willingly, with a glum expression. Then, something I really haven't anticipated happens: I have to identify with the onetime envied, later despised, signet ring. The dictatorship itself so to speak pushes it on my finger, as I too am a 'class-alien'. Now I fear for her and try to persuade her to remove it because she could get into trouble wearing it. She won't listen to me. She has worn it all her adult life, she will not disown her family, she is not ashamed of her ancestors, she tells me rather sharply. Pretty soon, in November 1949, they arrest her on a trumped-up, patently absurd charge of panicmongering.

"Who are you fucking, you stuck-up whore?" asks her first interrogator at the notorious security headquarters building, 60 Andrásy Avenue.

There are things to take pride in and wonder at in the little kitchen. For example there is a never-before seen gadget, the electric tin-opener, and next to it, hanging on the wall there's a square-metre sized piece of thick, perforated pasteboard, painted white and framed with red insulating tape, from whose holes hang, at a convenient distance from each other, a set of useful hooks accommodating a variety of kitchen utensils. It is a brilliant example of American practicality in offering solutions so blatantly simple that it takes your breath away.

She had seen it somewhere, put the scarlet border round it, fixed it to the wall all by herself and it is so handy and saves so much space. I don't recall in our previous life, or lives, rather, ever seeing her with a screwdriver or hammer in her hand. Now she is the possessor of pliers, chisels, files, a range of screws and keys, measuring tapes and insulating tapes, keeping them all in a professional-looking toolbox, proudly setting them out and recounting what she fixed with what.

We move into the living-room, though she uses the English term with a little apologetic smile, since she could hardly call it a salon, the word we used to refer to the spacious sitting-room in the Buda villa of my childhood. This small space is dark even in daytime, darker than the whole inner-tenement apartment. With a peculiar—and to me entirely unfamiliar—giggle and twinkle in her eyes, she lowers her voice and tells me that, through the window overlooking the tiny yard, she can see into a neighbouring apartment where the occupier, in fact the janitor, a corpulent black man—just imagine, Nicky!—right by the open window, even with the lights full on, there on the sofa, regularly, ahem, caressing himself! You can even hear his heavy breathing! That's why I have to keep the curtains drawn, even in the daytime. There are a couple of engravings on the wall in slightly clumsily fixed ready-made frames. In terms of furniture I see two ancient, much worn, and in every respect dissimilar, fauteuils that might charitably be referred to as antiques, and two, just as dissimilar, also

mock-antique, little tables, as well as a spindly baby-sized chest of drawers on barley-sugar legs, matching the rest only by virtue of imitation. These she has purchased, piece by piece, as and when opportunity afforded, from a thrift-shop, that is to say a store where are sold all kinds of cheap things abandoned or passed on by gentlefolk for charitable purposes. Some ornaments on the table, a few minor antique items of bric-à-brac, of silver, copper and porcelain, a photograph in a silver frame, a lovely old ashtray; most of them Csernovics and Damjanich family relics that I had brought from home on request. They obligingly made themselves at home here, as if, indeed, coming home. There are vases on the tables and, as has always been the case, there are flowers in them. The style is familiar: these are obvious signs of her refined taste, obvious only to me of course. I myself lived with her beautiful antique furniture, on Sas Hill, right to the end of the war. She used to collect the tiny bits of polished dark-brown veneer that had flaked or fallen off them and keep them in a tin cigarette-box: from time to time a skilled joiner would come and glue them back on with surgical precision as if they were missing pieces of a jigsaw, and there the furniture would be: repaired, impeccable, brilliantly glossy and majestic once more. Let such things be about her even now, however cheap, however fake, if only to serve for atmosphere, as compensation for the world that was once hers, so she may feel at home. This desire has crossed the ocean with her, it and she are inseparable companions, they are what she is, like her past, like her ring, like those capers balanced on the back of her fork, like the *aahkaahdémia*. And all this moves me, though I don't, of course, show it.

Translated by George Szirtes