

# A CHILD AND A SONG

by Ildy Lee

Russian soldiers in steel helmets and combat uniforms kicked in our front door with heavy black boots. Their large bodies blocked the entrance as they pointed the dark holes of their rifles at us. I was only five years old. Those soldiers, faceless under the shadows of their helmets terrified me.

"Don't shoot!" shouted Father in his perfect Russian. A tall officer forced his way inside the house we had been hiding in. He was young with freckles on his nose. He lowered his rifle, looked at Father and asked with amazement "Govoritie po Russky?" Father said "Da, da. Yes!" Then the young officer added with suspicion "Hungarians don't speak Russian. You could be a spy. You're coming with us!" As the soldiers dragged Father out the door, he turned to us and managed a weak smile. "Don't worry, I'll be back! I promise!" After they left, Mother burst into tears, "They'll kill him. He'll never come back!"

But I knew if Daddy said he'll be back, then he'll be back. I trusted him. My father never lied!

The door swung open and a disheveled old Marishka, the landlord's wife rushed in, out of breath.

"Do you know what's happening out there?" The village is being taken over by the Red Army! They're killing our men and raping our women. No one is safe. Not even children! Where can we hide?"

"In the closet!" said mother, but the closet was stuffed with junk. "Under the bed!" shouted Marishka, but the space was filled with boxes.

A horde of drunken soldiers burst through the door and swarmed inside. One fat soldier with slanted Mongolian eyes dragged my mother and pinned her to the wall. As she screamed for help, he smashed her face with the butt of his rifle. When I saw blood gushing from her mouth I ran to help her, but the Mongolian soldier raised his boot and kicked me across the floor. A tall officer with freckles on his nose pushed his way into the chaotic room. He was the same one who had arrested my father. Where was he now? Why didn't he come back as he promised? The officer fired a shot into the ceiling. Everybody stopped; there was a sudden silence. "Get

the hell out of here, all of you! This house is the Officers' quarters." He pushed and hit the drunken soldiers with his rifle-butt.

"Move!" the officer growled.

The fat Mongolian let go my mother's hand and turned with blood shot eyes to the freckle-faced officer. He viciously pulled out his knife and lifted it to stab the officer.

I heard a single shot and I saw the drunken Mongolian fall face down through the doorway. His body was swiftly dragged away. Terrified, I watched the tall officer put his gun back in its holster.

The room once again filled up, but now with officers. They seemed different. They came in slowly, in an orderly fashion. Some rubbed their hands warming around the stove. Others brought in collapsible wood benches and one played his harmonica. I was lost in a forest of smelly, dusty boots taller than I.

They pulled out bottles of vodka from their pockets. Marishka turned to Mother: "They're officers all right, but once they're drunk, they're all the same: Animals! And God save us!"

I watched Mother wiping away blood from her face. She reached for my baby brother in his crib when suddenly two enormous hands grabbed her hips. She turned around and slapped the officer. His face twitching with anger, he towered over her. Mother seemed terrified of what she has done. Menacingly, other officers stood up and circled her, with hungry eyes like wolf I once saw in a picture book. I was hanging around my mother's skirt, clutching her knees.

Mother bent down to me. "Do you want to save us?" she whispered into my ear. "You can do it! Go in the middle of the room and sing and dance for the soldiers. Be cute, as adorable as you can be; smile, throw kisses, disarm them. You can do it! Go Baby. Go and get them!" She pushed me to the middle of the room.

That's all I needed. This was my big chance to act like a grownup. I clapped my hands to get attention, and attention I got. I sang and danced my heart out, with a big smile and sparkling eyes. Even the officers circling my mother ignored her now. They watched me! I flew about the room, holding up my skirt, ruffles swirling around my waist. I had never had so

many people watching me sing and dance before, and I had never felt happier in my life. My joy was contagious, for everybody smiled back at me. At the end, I pirouetted, jumped in the air and finished on one knee, holding out my arms in triumph. They were all clapping, throwing their hats up, whistling and shouting "Bravo!" I threw kisses at them and they lifted me up, tossed me into the air and passed me around. Everybody wanted to touch me, hold me or kiss me. One officer gave me a whole apple. Another a walnut and someone gave me a half bar of chocolate. One soldier clutched me tight and wouldn't let me go. I looked up at him. It was the young officer with the freckles on his nose. The one who took away my father and killed the Mongolian soldier. But somehow I knew he wouldn't hurt me. Without his helmet he looked boyishly handsome, his blond hair combed to one side. He pointed to his chest and said his name: Boris. I pointed to my chest and said my name: Ildiko. He smiled at me, then from his pocket pulled out a faded picture. The face of a little girl of my age looked back at me. She was sitting on a swing that hung from a big oak tree. Her smiling face was framed by curly blond hair, just like mine. I knew it was his daughter. I closed my eyes and pretended he was my father. He closed his eyes and pretended I was his daughter, for he pulled me closer; I could hear his heart beating loud in his chest. I thought he was crying. The harmonica played a tune from his homeland and I knew that Boris didn't want to be here fighting my people. He wanted to be home holding his daughter the way he was holding me. His tears mingled with his sweat and ran down on his neck. He held me tight but I wouldn't move. I felt his pain.

The only thing that could have taken me away from this sweet moment was the even sweeter smell of my mother's vanilla cookies.

Earlier, Mother had baked cookies to take her mind off my father's fate, and now their spicy scent filled the room, overpowering the strong body-odor of the soldiers. Cookies were rare delicacies in wartime. Mother whispered to Marishka: "If I take the cookies out, the soldiers gobble them up. If I leave them in the oven, they'll burn to ashes. What should I do?"

"Serve them!" said Marishka.

Almost in tears Mother arranged them on a plate, and reluctantly passed the rare treasure around. But none of the soldiers touched the cookies. "For the malinka" they said, for the little one.

Mother's eyes grew wide as she turned toward the door. A man stood quietly in the doorway. Officer Boris put me down to greet the man, then clapped his hands for attention. "Everyone, meet comrade Tibor, he is our new interpreter." I ran to him; he was my father. He had come back, as he promised.

Mother smiled as Father held her. I wrapped my arms around their knees. Despite having lost our country and our home, not knowing what tomorrow would bring, for a moment we were truly happy. I beamed with pride when mother whispered in Father's ear: "The soldiers were about to harm us but your daughter saved our lives!"

Was it true? I'll never know. But those were my first steps toward my life in the limelight. And today, when the audience is clapping I close my eyes on stage and I still can hear the roaring applause of those war-torn, desperate soldiers who for a brief moment become friends instead of enemies... just because of a child and a song!

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