5

A good war

In *Magyar Hősök* (*Hungarian Heroes*), a lavishly illustrated book published in Budapest at the height of World War One, readers are presented with hundreds of apparently *bona fide* reports of astonishing acts of heroism and ingenuity by Hungarian soldiers and civilians. To read these stirring accounts and to gaze at the richly coloured illustrations of mounted hussars putting the enemy to flight is to believe in the invincibility as well as the inherent justness of the Hungarian cause. *Magyar Hősök*, which was published in late 1916, was clearly intended to bolster readers' flagging confidence in an eventual victory by Austria-Hungary and its allies, as well as their capacity for further exertion and self-sacrifice.

Lajos Platschek (left) with his brother Dezső

Take the story of eighty-two-year-old Márton Kerekes, a grizzled veteran of the 1848 Hungarian revolt against Habsburg rule. Kerekes and his neighbours, smallholders in the rugged hill country north of Sighet, received news that a force of Russian troops had been sighted on Hungarian soil, heading directly towards their village. Declining to take flight or to wait passively at home for the Russians to arrive, Kerekes immediately set about organising armed resistance.[31] Rallying a hundred and eighty men from the immediate locality, who armed themselves with scythes, hoes and other agricultural implements, Kerekes, dressed in his antique uniform and brandishing a sabre, placed himself at the head of this motley force and set off to confront the enemy. Along the way, the band was augmented by five gendarmes, armed with rifles, and two excise men.

Of course, it could be objected that Kerekes, far from being a hero and a patriot, was simply a meddlesome old fool, a Carpathian Don Quixote. After all, Kerekes had hectored his under-equipped neighbours into joining an enterprise that would almost certainly result in their deaths without securing any obvious military advantage. Scythes and hoes are no match for breach-loading rifles and machine guns.

Although the veteran Kerekes and a significant part of his rag-tag force met their deaths in the eventual encounter with the invading Russian troops, they managed to hold off the Russians for three hours, which was no mean feat. According to the account in *Magyar Hősök*, Kerekes' men set fire to a bridge spanning a small river, which the Russians would have to cross in order to continue their advance. With no option but to enter the water, the Russian troops were pelted with stones as they waded across the river and slashed with scythes and other agricultural implements as they tried to scramble up the bank on the opposite side, where Kerekes and his peasant militia was deployed. While the eventual outcome of this starkly unequal combat was never in any doubt, and although Hungarian fatalities were alarmingly high, the ferocious resistance put up by Kerekes and his band of patriotic smallholders was remarkable.

Or consider the account of the valorous conduct of Corporal Mandel Katz who, in civilian life, was a trader in a small town in present-day Slovakia. This story merits attention for a number of reasons. In the first place, Corporal Katz displayed exceptional bravery, tactical sense and leadership skills, as well as ruthlessness. With just forty-three Hungarian infantrymen under his command, Katz mounted a successful attack on an enemy force comprising four thousand Russian troops![32]

According to *Magyar Hősök*, the infantry unit commanded by Corporal Katz managed to cross enemy lines unobserved, in dense fog, catching a group of Russian officers off guard. The officers, who had been warming themselves by a fire, were cut down in a sudden hail of bullets, leaving one lieutenant colonel, one captain, two first lieutenants, one lieutenant, one adjutant, several non-commissioned officers, and twelve rank and file soldiers lying dead. An additional forty Russian troops raised their arms and surrendered to Katz and his men, while the remainder of the substantial Russian force, unaware of their overwhelming numerical superiority, simply fled.

Aside from the startling nature of Corporal Katz's victory over a much larger body of enemy troops, the published account of his military exploits is noteworthy because, as Mandel Katz's name clearly suggests, he was a Jew. At the time, neither the editors of *Hungarian Heroes* nor Mandel Katz saw any contradiction between being a Jew *and* a loyal Hungarian. In a national census conducted in 1900, no less than seventy-two per cent of Hungary's Jews stated that they considered themselves Hungarian in terms of their cultural and political identity.[33]

For Mandel Katz, as for Hungary's wartime prime minister, István Tisza, a man's religion was a private matter. Loyal and valorous Hungarians were to be found amongst all of the major religious denominations in Hungary, not least Jews. During World War One, the country's sizeable and comparatively well-educated Jewish population provided approximately 300,000 soldiers for Austria-Hungary's armies.[34] These included 25,000 officers and no fewer than 25 generals. In addition, thousands of skilled Jewish professionals, in such vital fields as medicine, pharmacology, dentistry, engineering, and veterinary science, made a significant contribution to Austria-Hungary's war effort. While precise data is unavailable, it's clear that tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews were killed in action and many more, including Miklós, my maternal grandfather, suffered life-changing injuries.

Yet the economic, social and other tensions in Hungarian society, that became increasingly unmanageable as the War dragged on, were eagerly exploited by opposition politicians and by much of the Catholic press, resulting in widespread accusations that Jews were profiteers, cowards and fundamentally unassimilable.[35] The process of scapegoating and vilifying Hungary's Jews only intensified after Austria-Hungary's defeat in World War One and in the wake of the humiliating peace treaty imposed on Hungary by the Allied Powers. By late summer 1941, with the radical right in the ascendancy across much of Europe, the idea that a Jew could be entrusted with weapons and permitted to serve in Hungary's armed forces had become anathema. If Mandel Katz had been of military age in late 1941, he would have been conscripted into an auxiliary labour battalion along with some of the country's finest doctors, scholars, poets, musicians, and artists. Katz might have found himself digging anti-tank ditches or unloading goods wagons in sub-zero temperatures, without warm clothing, decent shelter, proper food, or medical care. Like some of the Jews conscripted into the labour battalions, Mandel Katz might have been ordered, at gunpoint, to walk across a minefield to detonate unexploded mines. Or he could have been sent up a tree and used for target-practice by the battalion's non-commissioned officers. One thing is quite certain: Mandel Katz's formidable military skills wouldn't have been called upon.

By the eve of World War Two, following the passage of sweeping Anti-Jewish Laws — and after years of unrelenting anti-Semitic invective from many of Hungary's leading clerics, politicians, and intellectuals — Mandel Katz would have been treated as a pariah by most of his fellow countrymen. Even if he had converted to Christianity, become a devout Catholic priest, declared himself an atheist, married a Hungarian noblewoman (before the interdiction of marriages between Jews and gentiles, naturally), captured a notorious enemy agent, or invented a weapon of mass destruction for the sole use of the Hungarian army, Mandel Katz wouldn't have been able to redeem himself. If he had walked on water or performed a host of other tricks, involving loaves and fishes, Mandel Katz would still have been labelled a Jew, with scant prospect of escaping his fate.

After the War, scarcely anyone in Hungary remembered the heroic exploits of Mandel Katz. The valour and patriotism displayed by Katz and celebrated in *Magyar Hősök* quickly faded into oblivion. On the other hand, almost every literate Hungarian would have been aware of the *fictional* Jews portrayed in an influential novel published in 1919, *The Village That Was Swept Away*.

While Mandel Katz was risking his life fighting the enemies of Austria-Hungary, and while my great-uncle Ágoston and grandfather Miklós struggled to hold back the Italian forces that threatened to overrun a large swathe of the Empire — depriving Austria-Hungary of its only stretch of coastline — Dezső Szabó was scribbling away in his cosy schoolmaster's study in Lőcse (now Levoča in present-day Slovakia), putting the finishing touches to the manuscript of *The Village That Was Swept Away* (*Az Elsodort Falu*).

Dezső Szabó

Szabó's novel was completed in August 1918, just a few months before the end of the War. Published in the summer of the following year, *The Village That Was Swept Away* proved an enormous and unexpected success. It rapidly established itself as one of the most popular and influential works of fiction to appear in Hungary in the inter-war era. According to the literary critic Béla Pomogáts, the book's central ideas had an immediate and major influence on literary and political life in the country, 'determining the path of entire generations in the decades after its publication'.[36]

Szabó's beliefs, which he succeeded in implanting in many of his readers' minds, were reactionary and xenophobic. The novel extolled the virtues of traditional Hungarian village life, while deploring the influence of the country's Germans and Jews on Hungarian society. Szabó identified Germans and Jews, in particular, with the dissemination of such modern 'evils' as socialism, capitalism, liberalism, and democracy.

The Village That Was Swept Away presented readers with a succession of anti-Semitic stereotypes. In place of the valorous and authentic Mandel Katz — and of the tens of thousands of patriotic Jews who had fought for Austria-Hungary — Szabó served up a number of crudely racist fictional caricatures, including a cowardly Jewish bank clerk. Summoned to appear at a provincial recruiting station, where his fitness to serve in the Empire's armed forces was to be assessed by doctors, the bank clerk was deceitful and cowardly:[37]

> A tall, scrawny Jewish youth came forward hesitantly. He was tottering in such a way that, with every step, it seemed he would collapse… He had prepared for the medical assessment as if it were a difficult exam. For weeks he had eaten less and less each day until he had grown thin… he had stayed up each night and he had drunk so much strong black coffee that the ticking of his heart sounded like someone striking a bell. By masturbating repeatedly, he had succeeded in producing an inflamed swelling on his groin, which allowed him to complain of a hernia. He had sprayed some sort of liquid into his eyes, so that they were sore and swollen… All through the nights he had practised coughing in a hollow, deathly fashion. And

> every night he tightly bound his legs in two places so that the veins would appear black and swollen…

The literary merits of *The Village That Was Swept Away* have been hotly disputed. Dezső Kosztolányi, one of the most gifted writers to emerge in Hungary in the first half of the twentieth century, mocked Szabó's novel, declaring that it must be the work of a talentless imposter who had appropriated Szabó's name and reputation in order to increase his otherwise meagre sales. In a review of the book which appeared in the journal *Új Nemzedék* in November 1920, Kosztolányi dismissed *The Village That Was Swept Away* with the damning comment that he could not discern the creative powers of a true novelist anywhere in Szabó's text.[38]

But if the book was a failure in literary terms, it was undoubtedly a commercial and cultural triumph. As the writer and literary critic Antal Szerb ruefully acknowledged, by the 1930s Dezső Szabó had become, 'the preeminent figure in Hungary's intellectual and spiritual life'.[39] For many Hungarians who came of age after the Great War, it was Dezső Szabó's fictional Jews, including the cowardly, dissembling bank clerk, and Gutman, the rapacious, physically repulsive businessman, who defined their understanding of Jews and of the minority's supposedly baleful influence on Hungarian society.

'My father attended the Ludovica,' Zsuzsa tells me with evident pride. 'He was an officer in the army.' During World War One, Zsuzsa's father, Ágoston Weisz, completed an officer training course at the elite Ludovica Military Academy. Occupying a massive neo-classical building in Budapest's Eighth District, the Ludovica was founded in the nineteenth century to train officer cadets for the army as well as to provide instruction for serving army officers.

Ágoston Weisz with his wife, Juliska, and their daughter Zsuzsa

By the end of the century, when it was granted the status of a full military academy, the Ludovica was considered to be on a par with the prestigious Athenaeum in Vienna.

Zsuzsa and I are sitting in her comfortable living room in Wekerletelep, a pretty residential district of Budapest, built in the early decades of the twentieth century. Although she and I are related, we hardly know one another. Zsuzsa's father was the younger of my grandmother Etelka's brothers. For much of the time, particularly after they were adults, Ágoston and Etelka rarely spoke to one another. Each nursed a profound sense of grievance towards the other that notions of kinship or family solidarity were unable to dispel. Alike in that they were intensely proud as well as stubborn, character traits that they had no doubt inherited from their parents, Ágoston and Etelka mostly kept their distance from one another.

As we leaf through a family album, Zsuzsa tells me that her father had been extremely athletic in his youth, with a passion for team sports, particularly football. Several years before World War One, Ágoston was already a member of the youth team of Ferencváros (universally known as 'Fradi' or the FTC), one of Budapest's leading football clubs. In 1913, at the age of just eighteen, he had been appointed manager of the youth team, an unusually onerous responsibility for someone so young.

Ágoston's playing career had been brought to an abrupt end just a few months before the end of the First World War. An infantry officer, he was wounded while serving on the Italian front, sustaining a serious injury to one of his ankles. For the remainder of his life, Ágoston walked with a pronounced limp and wore orthopaedic shoes that were specially made for him.

'My father was wounded in the Italian Alps on 13 June 1918,' Zsuzsa says, with characteristic precision. Speaking in Hungarian, she adds that her father was injured in a battle at the *Tonalei szoros*. The *Passo del Tonale*, as it's known in Italian, is a bleak mountain pass situated south west of the town of Bolzano. During World War One, Italy succeeded in wresting this mountainous terrain from Austria-Hungary, albeit at enormous cost in human lives.

In comparison with the Gallipoli campaign, Passchendaele, or the Battle of the Somme, comparatively little has been written or broadcast in English about the fierce battles between the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies during World War One. Yet, as the historian Mark Thompson has pointed out, '[s]ome of the most savage fighting of the Great War' took place on this front, with the loss of around a million men who 'died in battle, of wounds and disease or as prisoners'.[40] In contrast to the Second World War, when Italian troops earned a reputation as poor and irresolute soldiers, with no stomach for sustained fighting, in World War One Italian armies often fought tenaciously for the 'recovery' of territory that they considered part of their national patrimony.

If Zsuzsa is correct concerning the date and the place where her father was wounded, then Ágoston must have been injured during a comparatively minor skirmish. Just two days later, on 15 June 1918, a massive Austro-Hungarian offensive commenced further east, along the Piave River. Almost sixty Austro-Hungarian divisions were committed to this campaign, which ended in abject failure and in the loss of 118,000 Austro-Hungarian troops who were killed, injured, captured, or declared missing.[41]

By the time Ágoston was wounded, in June 1918, the armies of Austria-Hungary were in a pitiful state. Troops had to contend with inadequate supplies of weapons and ammunition, worn-out uniforms and boots, and very little food. As Mark Thompson notes in his book *The White War*, a gripping account of the fighting on the Italian front, the daily ration for Austria-Hungary's front-line troops in Italy was reduced to 300 grams of bread and 200 grams of meat in January 1918.[42] In reality, many soldiers no longer received even these meagre rations, forcing them to forage for something to eat. In the early months of 1918, while my great-uncle Ágoston remained at his post, determined to fulfil his duties as an officer in the army of Austria-Hungary, approximately 200,000 Hungarian soldiers deserted, worn down by fatigue, hunger, and mounting concern for their families.

Unlike Ágoston, who thrived in the army, it's hard to imagine that Miklós, my mild-mannered grandfather, was a natural soldier. Miklós lacked Ágoston's martial spirit and natural air of authority, as well as his future brother-in-law's fondness for masculine company. In contrast to Petőfi, the celebrated Hungarian poet who courted death on the battlefield near Segesvár in July 1849, Miklós valued family and personal ties more highly than abstract notions of glory or national destiny. While Petőfi unhesitatingly chose death over life once it had become clear that Hungary's revolt against Habsburg rule was doomed, Miklós would have considered such behaviour foolish.

Yet, my grandfather had a keen and overriding sense of duty. It would never have occurred to him to try to evade conscription, unlike the fictional Jewish bank clerk in *The Village That Was Swept Away*. After receiving his call-up papers, and following a perfunctory medical examination, Miklós was sent for basic training and then assigned to one of the Empire's battered infantry regiments, strung out along barren mountain slopes, facing the Italian forces.

Hungarian soldiers on the Italian front, 1917

There are no surviving photographs of Miklós in army uniform, unlike the photo of my paternal grandfather, Lajos Platschek, and his younger brother, Dezső. In that photograph, which is reproduced at the beginning of this chapter, Dezső appears almost nonchalant, supremely confident that Austria-Hungary and its allies will prevail. Sporting the full dress uniform of a Reserve Second Lieutenant in an infantry regiment, his gloved left hand is resting lightly on his sword. There are three medals pinned on his chest, two of which are for valour in the face of the enemy.[43]

In contrast to his suave, self-assured younger brother, my grandfather Lajos looks uncomfortable, almost sheepish. Although the two brothers are linking arms in a casual display of familial intimacy and male comradeship, it's clear from the photograph that the young men aren't equals. While Dezső is a highly decorated army officer, Lajos's coarsely cut uniform, with a single stripe on the sleeve and a small button in his collar, indicates that he's an enlisted infantryman. Unlike Dezső, it seems that Lajos wasn't viewed as officer material, despite his school leaving certificate and a teaching diploma.

The author of *The Village That Was Swept Away* would have been shocked to learn that Dezső and Lajos were Jews, just like my great-uncle Ágoston Weisz and maternal grandfather Miklós Faragó, both of whom served on the Italian front during the Great War. Proud Hungarians of the Mosaic faith, the men of my family were united in their determination to do their duty, whatever the cost.

Yet even if there are no surviving photographs of Miklós in uniform — and it's possible that none were taken — I have a number of official papers that provide some details of his army service. One of these is a document, dated 12 October 1940, which states that Miklós completed an officer's training course on 15 April 1918 and that he was appointed a *Tartalékos Zászlós*, or Reserve Officer Cadet, on 1 July of that year.

The term *Tartalékos*, or 'Reserve', is misleading. By the spring of 1918, Austria-Hungary had practically no reserve officers to draw upon. After almost four years of fighting, an alarming proportion of the Empire's junior career army officers had been killed, injured, or taken prisoner. New officers like Miklós had to be trained as quickly as possible to take their place. Many of those selected for officer training during the War were high school graduates who had already served in the ranks. They frequently found themselves back on the front line as soon as their accelerated training was completed.

Within weeks of his appointment as a *Tartalékos Zászlós*, Miklós was badly wounded during a fierce artillery barrage. 'For months, he was completely paralysed down his right side,' says my mother. 'He couldn't move his right hand or his right leg and he couldn't speak. He had to learn to write with his left hand.'

Unlike Zsuzsa, who knows the precise circumstances in which her father had been wounded in the First World War, my mother can't tell me very much about when or where Miklós was injured, other than that it happened 'somewhere on the Italian front'. After returning to civilian life, Miklós seems to have made a conscious decision to live entirely in the present and to avoid talking about the War. It's as if my grandfather had placed everything he had seen and experienced as a soldier inside an iron chest that he had sealed and buried deep underground, where its contents could not contaminate him or those whom he loved.

If my mother doesn't know exactly when or where her father was injured, she is adamant that Miklós spent months undergoing treatment in military hospitals and nursing homes before he was judged well enough to be sent to live with his parents. Because of the severity of his injuries, he received a war invalidity pension for the remainder of his life.

'He was terribly lame,' says my mother. 'He used to drag his right foot along the ground.' My mother slowly gets up from the armchair in which she has been sitting and shows me how her father walked. 'He could only walk very slowly,' she adds.

My mother walks slowly too, although that is a consequence of extreme old age. Miklós was barely twenty-two years old when he was wounded in the Great War. He had his whole life ahead of him.