

Knowing that a peaceful coexistence required patience and tolerance, everyone tried to keep tempers from flaring, especially when the children got too boisterous, or the budding romance between Eta and Latzi got a little too schmaltzy. The only one who seemed to be thoroughly unhappy with the prevailing circumstances was the younger Riedl boy, Erno. The beautiful, athletic teenager, not yet sixteen, was annoyed with being cooped up in a house full of women and children, unable to make friends with other boys of his age. Bursting with boundless energy and no outlet to release it, he became withdrawn and would sit by the radio all day, listening to announcements of glorious victories and the boastings of an incredible new wonder weapon that was just a step away from being unleashed to annihilate the enemy. There were no defeats, only temporary withdrawals necessary to regroup and redirect the fighting forces. Total victory was near. These broadcasts aimed to whip up patriotic sentiments in naïve and easily influenced youngsters, urging them to come to the defense of their country against the barbaric Russian forces. They played on their conscience using never-ending propaganda that it was up to them to save their mothers and sisters from being ravaged by brutal Asiatic hordes. There was no let-up in trying to convince them that it was their duty to take up arms and join the brave men already in uniform in their heroic effort to achieve final victory.

These messages had a profound effect on the boy. Every able man should be in uniform! He even confronted his brother, how come he was sitting at home instead of fighting the war? It was simple, Lasko explained. All university students were exempted from military duty on the ground that they represented

the future brainpower of the nation. They would be sorely needed when the war was over to help rebuild the ruined country. They could volunteer as reservists in the National Guards (*Nemzetőrség*), an armed paramilitary unit created to safeguard public safety and help to maintain civilian order in emergencies, but they would never be sent to the front to die on the battlefield.

Then on New Year's Eve, as the two families sat down to their meager holiday meal, everyone noticed that Erno was only pushing the food around his plate, hardly taking a bite. He was nervous and had no appetite, and for good reason. He knew he could not stall any longer confessing that he had enlisted in the army and would be leaving almost immediately.

His parents scolded him not to joke about such things; they had enough problems as it was. He was not yet sixteen, the minimum age to sign up—except in some paramilitary youth brigades where boys as young as thirteen were accepted. But when he pulled out papers to prove that he was telling the truth, all hell broke loose.

“This cannot be! They can't take you, you are underage!” his father was out of his seat, shouting, “unless you . . .” His half-finished sentence was left hanging in the air as Erno, lowering his head and not daring to look him in the eye, admitted that he had forged his birth certificate.

Everyone sat in stunned silence, staring at the boy. Was he crazy? How could he be so foolish? Then his mother was on her feet, wagging a finger in front of his face. “Oh no, you are not going anywhere! Your father will tell them that you lied and falsified your papers. Once we prove it, they have to excuse you and that will be the end of it.” She then turned to her husband, expecting confirmation. “You are in the military, you can do something for this stupid boy—anything to get him out of this mess—can't you?”

But he couldn't; it was too late. He checked the order twice, there was no doubt; the boy was to report for duty in two days. Still refusing to believe it, Erzsebet snatched the paper out of his hand, but after glancing at the January 2 date, she collapsed in her seat, sobbing uncontrollably. There was not enough time to intervene.

The helpless father now turned on his son, venting his anger and frustration.

“How could you do this to us, to your mother? It's because you are listening to that stupid radio all the time! How could you believe that idiotic propaganda about victories? Victories, hah! Nothing but lies! And you, you believe them, when even a blind man could see that the war is lost! Do you realize what you have done, what you are getting into? You were safe here, together with your family, had a roof over your head and food to eat; all you had to do was wait a little longer! But no, you had to throw it all away and play the big hero, and for what? For nothing! You'll be nothing but fodder for the Nazis! Remember that when you are staring at a Russian with his machine gun pointed at your head, and you left without a reliable weapon to shoot him first! I know what kind of equipment the soldiers are given today. Nothing but junk, guns that jam before

they have a chance to pull the trigger. Oh, you silly, ignorant boy! I should kill you now, at least we'd know where you are buried."

Suddenly he stopped shouting; it was useless, it wouldn't accomplish anything. The sad fact remained that they most likely would lose their son. He sank back into his chair, gripping the armrest until his knuckles turned white. Resting his head on the back of the chair he squeezed his eyes shut to arrest the angry tears building behind his lids.

Erno sat motionless, looking down to avoid the stares. His brother Lasko quietly asked him if there was a chance to change his mind. He could go into hiding, as so many others deserting the army were doing. It was only a matter of weeks before the war would be over. Even those still in uniform talked among family and friends that to continue the fight was sheer lunacy, all was lost, and no magical secret weapon could turn things around. Lasko pleaded with him to stay, if for no other reason but for the sake of their mother. He did not have to go; they'd find a hiding place for him.

Erno admitted that he might have made a mistake by enlisting, but it was too late now, he would have to go. It was the honorable thing to do. He was not a coward like those who were running away. And when he said that deserters should be shot or hanged, his brother threw up his hands. The gullible young fool was mindlessly mouthing the garbage he heard on the radio.

Ilonka and the girls immediately brought out the knitting basket and feverishly began to knit woolen socks, gloves, and scarves, hoping they would help to keep him warm at the front. A day later when he left, he carried the ardent prayers of all who loved him, but the Zachars would never see him again.