

Budapest. The prestigious Dohány Street was suffused with elegant ambiance. The large apartment buildings stood next to each other in a sophisticated European style, white and quiet, their elongated windows facing the street in strict symmetry and their entrances decorated with long columns and ornamented cornices. The owners – rich Jews and non-Jews alike – were full of pride when they walked from the city centre to their Dohány Street and passed by the building site of the Neolog synagogue. Anyone following the construction understood that the Temple compound was going to be one of the most magnificent sites of the city and, accordingly, that street's residents would only leave their homes when dressed appropriately and meticulously from top to bottom.

Vera's grandparents had a flair for investing, and they acquired a family home on Dohány Street, not far from the building site. The house was big and white. At the entrance stood two tall round columns supporting a gable decorated with a relief of leafy branches held together by a curly string. From the sidewalk across the street the relief looked as if it were a copy of the emperor's wife's throne. Vera was born in the family home twelve years after the festive opening of the big synagogue, which was, as expected, breath-taking in its splendor.

"Well," remarked my friend Agi, as she told me the story, "this synagogue is the largest and the most beautiful in all Europe. But there are beautiful cathedrals and beautiful mosques too. That doesn't make a better world, does it?"

Vera's grandfather, who purchased the house, used to stand by the window in his old age, look at Dohány Street and marvel, "there is no city like Budapest! It is the best city in Europe!" And the rest of the happy citizenry believed that too, because when the city was united after years of war, it began to grow and afford them a life of safety and pleasure.

In 1889, Vera was eighteen years old, a pretty and educated girl who knew not only her mother tongue, Hungarian, but also Russian, German and French. She sat in the living room of the big family home on Dohány Street and played piano. Her forehead was broad, her nose large and prominent, and her pale brown eyes followed her fingers on the keys. She raised her eyes to the notes, returned to the keys, and every so often forced herself to play again a

passage that did not go smoothly, saying to herself, even if I am not the most talented musician in the city, I must practice, because music is important for broadening the mind and enriching the soul.

From the next room she heard her mother calling the family to get ready to go to the opera, and Vera stopped her playing, lowered the piano fallboard, and went to her room. Half an hour later she stood erect at the door, wearing a long, pleated cotton dress in cream colour with a shiny white sash belt. On her shoulders stood out layers of large fabric leaves, starched and ironed like huge rose petals, and two thin muslin sleeves went down from them to her hands. Her aubergine coloured hair was gathered at her nape, rolled upward and fastened with a golden pin, and on her neck she wore a thin gold chain with a round pearl.

Her parents were well-to-do wine merchants, who raised her and her brother with only faint affinity to tradition. "They even considered converting to Christianity," my friend Agi told me, "but in the end they decided it was not necessary and did not bother." Like many of their acquaintances, they belonged to the Neolog synagogue, and like them used to go to that stately temple for holidays and special events. But not all their friends were Jewish. In fact, their social circle was mixed and included non-Jews as well.

I do not know why I even mentioned the fact that they were Jews. Why is it important? Religious affiliation never interested Vera. Politics interested her, social and philosophical new ideas attracted her, as well as literature and art, and those had no religious affiliation... Although maybe there was some connection after all, because somehow there were many Jews among the educated and professionals she knew, and somehow, in the various municipal offices and organizations everyone knew who was Jewish and who was not. Maybe secret lists were kept in locked drawers. Indeed, sometimes some people whispered and looked at her askance, and sometimes they excluded her from a conversation, but she considered them rude and preferred to ignore them, because in the end, what all rich people wanted was to go to the Opera, the theatre and ballrooms dressed in their finest, rub shoulders, see and be seen.

To see and be seen was important in their circles, and Vera would go out with her parents or her friends, beaming in the exclusive chic of Budapest's ladies, wearing dresses sewn

for her for that purpose, rich with pleats and gatherings, lace, ribbons and muslin, decked out in expensive jewellery and wide brim hats decorated with big clusters of colourful silk flowers.

She attached great importance to appropriate attire and used to tell everyone that people should be careful how they dress, “because that is what holds a person upright!” They would hear her in amazement and shift uncomfortably. They intended to have small talk about fashion and pepper it with some gossip, and this one comes out with overbearing statements. Vera would scrutinise their faces seriously, “anyone who neglects their appearance would end up in life’s dark corners.”

Her parents did not make it a secret that their daughter had a sizable dowry, but young men avoided her, and one of them, articling in law and of a very respectable family, whom everyone thought would make a good match, told his friends, “it is better to marry less money and more woman.”

Already when in high school, Vera read classical and modern literature in four languages, read the papers and kept herself informed on current events. In the circles of the rich and privileged in which she moved, she was considered opinionated, one who used affected language and a critical tone – the kind of sharp speech that was emanating with precise inflection, soaring from under her large nose accompanied by a piercing look at her companions who usually tried to avoid her.

Nevertheless, she had five or six friends from high school, smiley girls who accepted her into their fold even though she was, in their view, “serious and strange”. On weekends they used to sit together in the most prestigious cafés in the city such as Café Gerbeaud with its Viennese style, where everything was polished and shiny as though any minute Emperor Franz Josef, his Sissi and their entourage were about to enter. The girls used to look at the many café goers, enjoy the heavenly pastry served there and chat, although Vera did not participate in the conversations, only to add her opinion when the discussion turned to world affairs.

But mostly the girls preferred to sit in the bohemian Fészek Art Club, also known as Fészek café, which was designed with mixed styles of art nouveau and oriental ornamentation, and on its walls the local artists displayed their paintings. The girls tried to sit at a table near the painters, authors and musicians, who talked loudly, smiled at the girls, winked at them and

sometimes even said something to them. And they would giggle – except for Vera, who was indifferent, and men’s gazes did not interest her. She heard what they said, examined them curiously, and noticed those who were careful dressers, but they did not arouse admiration on her part. “She is as cold as a marble statue,” whispered one of her friends when Vera went to the restroom, and the girls around the table nodded their heads in agreement.

#### A Full Ladle

One day Vera and her friends arrived at the opening of an art show of young artists at a new art gallery. Painters, authors, poets and musicians gathered there and mixed in with the crowd that came to rub shoulders with them: dolled-up gentlemen and ladies - proud Budapest residents who love themselves and their city. People stood or moved about in the melee full of bows and smiles and smells of eau-de-cologne and cigarettes smoke, and in the throng there stood Gabor Pahl, a red-haired young man named, who had just returned from Paris, where he studied art.

He was a twenty-three-year old Hungarian, thin as a twig with bright brown eyes like the eyes of a wolf. In spite of his young age, his cheeks and chin were covered with an orange beard, thick and curly, that united with a reddish moustache, its sharp ends standing out, which gave him the look of a refined savage who painted his own image.

Gabor Pahl wandered among the guests in the gallery, examined the ladies in the room with hot eyes, and breathed heavily in admiration at every dress rustling next to him and every whiff of perfume wafting to him. Women fascinated him in their walk and their stance, in their sitting and their lying. He noticed every detail about them, the way their head moved and their hair swayed, their expressions and their words. Their sensual secrets drove his imagination wild, and he thought life converged in the female body like light beams gathering in a diamond.

His gaze scanned the crowd around him and when his wolf eyes caught Vera, they seized her light-brown eyes. She halted not far from him and looked at him, and he bounced the end of his reddish mustache in an intimate smile, as though he had discovered her secret. She felt a kind of a sting in her eyes, and a pleasant heat spread through her body; she was immobile for a moment, and then turned and scurried out.

Outside the gallery Vera began to run, and for the first time in her life she ran for a long time, with hair flowing, hurried breaths and burning cheeks. Finally, she stopped, calmed her breathing and fixed her hair, and when she looked about her she realized that she had reached the market. Smells, colours and voices descended on her and raised in her a strange gaiety. She started to walk among the booths, and for no reason stood next to a booth of housewares, whose owner was a good looking young man. "Right away she knew he was Jewish," my friend Agi said to me, "people knew these things."

The man straightened up on the other side of the counter laden with pots, skillets and eating utensils, looked at her in puzzlement and called, "Madam!" spread one arm like an operetta singer and with the other he handed Vera a large metal ladle, "Madam! This is for Madam full of love, and there is much more in the pot that is inside here," and laid his operetta-hand on his chest.

Vera looked at him surprised, and he bowed so low, that his forehead almost hit the counter, "I am Ferenc, at your service." His voice sounded like a storm in the forest and he had the scorching gaze of a gypsy lover. Vera felt the pleasant heat that passed through her earlier in the gallery returning and flowing in her body, getting stronger and pooling in her eyes. Then, all of a sudden, a smile surged from inside her to this Ferenc, and she spun like a bird in a wild whirlwind of falling in love.

Two months later, when she informed her parents of her love, they were stunned.

Her father rose, exhaling in anger, and exited the room, and she was left sitting motionless at the dining table. Her mother walked back and forth in front of her, shot her angry looks and breathed fast "how? how?" She stopped and stretched her arms wide, "what are you doing to your life!?" and raised her voice, "he is nothing, a poor nobody with no social standing!" Vera looked out the window and was silent. Her mother returned to pace the room and her quick panting got stronger, "how do you let yourself do such a thing to us?!" She put her hands on her waist and went to Vera with exploding anger, as though she was going to slap her, "what do you think you are doing?!"

Vera did not flinch back and did not lower her eyes.

The door opened at once and her father walked in in quick steps. He stopped in front of Vera stiffly erect with his hands behind his back and looked at her as if she were a business partner caught in embezzlement. "Listen," he said in a stony voice, "we have nothing more to discuss. If you do not stop this thing right away, you are not our daughter!"

Vera got up, looked at her father, looked at her mother, and said in a steady voice, "then not." She went to her room, packed her summer clothes and her winter clothes, several books and her jewellery in two suitcases, slung over her shoulder a cloth bag with two hats in it, and when she left the house, she closed the door behind her quietly. Ferenc came from the corner, kissed her cheek and took the suitcases off her hands. They got married, and her parents penalized her with silent estrangement, deprived her of any assets, and abandoned her to life of poverty.

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"Rafi, look how stupid people can be! Look how they destroy things! It was true love but, despite that, Vera's parents disowned her. Can you understand such a thing?"

Editor-Rafi stares at me through his glasses with his little dark eyes, looks at me as if I am beyond help. "Damn it, Noa, why do you even think about it? It's obvious why Vera's parents disowned her!"

Why does he get so hot and bothered...? Ugh, he heard my thought.

"You get out of rhythm; you always do that! You start great, let the scenes flow, and all of a sudden some gnat gets into you and stops you!"

He talks to me as though I have started to give a Speech From The Throne in bed... But anyway, why is it so obvious that love is regarded as less than money, social status or pedigree? "Shaul, what do you think? Why did Vera's parents disown her?" Old-Prince-Shaul puts on a fatherly smile, his old head with its thinning hair leans a little to one side, and a light grin appears on his yellowish face, "to our chagrin, most of humanity is like that, people do not understand how important true love is," and suddenly his old face creases. Maybe he remembers that he decided to leave me exactly when we were at the apex of our love.

I look at Childhood-Love-Moosh, “what do you say?” he must have a better answer, he is a writer, is he not? Moosh raises heavy eyelids to me as if I pulled him out of a nap, and removes the oily straw strands off his forehead, “isn’t-it-clear?”

“What’s clear?”

“Noa, most-of-the-rich-and-privileged see-love-as-something-silly-or-a-disease. They-run-the-world-without-compassion-and-they-wage-wars. Enough, continue-writing.”

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Vera and Ferenc traveled for two hours in a horse drawn public wagon, and arrived at Pesterzsébet, a poor suburb on the outskirts of Budapest. The suburb was not built according to a city plan but simply assembled, when multitudes of poor farmers streamed to the city carried on the sweeping waves of the industrial revolution. The farmers became labourers and worked in the large factories growing outside the city next to the railroads. These were large yellow buildings with tall and thick walls and small barred windows. Inside these buildings stood new industrial machines, and masses of labourers worked there from the first light of dawn to the darkness of night.

Not far from the factories, the labourers erected huts or little stone houses with thatched roofs and settled their families there. A hut touched a hut, a house touched a house, and a crooked street was formed, from which another crooked street branched and another crooked street and another one. Later little grocery stores opened between houses, booths for used cloths and old shoes, and fourth-hand furniture and patched blankets, like a burgeoning flea market looking for suitable corners in the alleys.

A much trampled-on unpaved road crossed the length of the emerging suburb and became the main street, where horse drawn wagons traversed it back and forth, paused, loaded and unloaded goods. A church was built at the end of the street with a spire, a bell and a priest, and devout labourers in clean shirts gathered in it on Sundays.

In the adjacent quarter, among huts with sinking roofs, a little synagogue was built, and next to it a mikvah. On the Sabbath the synagogue gathered to it the pious Jews, who also donned their clean shirts.

Fifty years later the crooked streets were paved with small cobble stones, and low-rise slums with tiled roofs were built along them. The huts with the sinking roofs which were abandoned were rented out for living quarters or were used for storage. Two or three elementary schools were opened in one storey buildings built in patch work, and small rooms without doors were used as classrooms for the workers' children. The flea market also became a slum, and now meat, vegetables and fruits were sold there. The district was destitute and crumpled in its wretchedness, but it drew increasingly more people who came to live there, practically all of them poor.

Vera and Ferenc rented a wooden hut with one room and a kitchen in one corner, a little storeroom outside with a separate entrance, and a minuscule wooden cubicle for a toilet. "All right," said Vera and looked around her "now we will create a home here." Ferenc was excited. He hugged her and said, "Anything you say!" They bought an armoire in the flea market, a bed with a straw mattress, a table and two chairs. "First thing Vera cleaned the armoire, and immediately hung her dresses in it," my friend Agi told me.

They lived in the wooden hut and opened a small grocery store in the adjacent storeroom. Vera managed the store and Ferenc continued his small trade of housewares he bought and sold on long winter journeys to faraway towns and villages. "In winter people are stuck at home, and that's how I get them to buy," he explained to Vera.

"Not exactly," my friend Agi remarked mockingly, "the housewares business was only a front. Nobody checked what he hid in his crates, you see? He had all kinds of shady businesses, but he couldn't turn them into money."

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1891. Vera stands in the snow in a grey woolen coat, and her head is wrapped in a green woolen scarf covering her mouth. Her large nose peeks above it and her broad forehead is bare. An alley in Pesterzsébet can be seen in the background. There are no paved roads there, and no sidewalks, only a white winter blanket spread among the low houses.

Vera is pregnant, the coat doesn't close over her belly anymore. Her hands are in a fur muff and her fingers are intertwined. Ferenc leaves the house, walks to her in big steps and



stretches his arms to her. She pulls one hand out of the muff, extracts the other hand, and moves heavily from the little depression in the snow into Ferenc's embrace. He lays his hand on her belly and feels it like a Gypsy lover. Vera looks around and shoves him away with a whisper, "enough, not in the street..." and he laughs with his loud voice rough from smoking, "so what, you are my wife, no?" She looks into his big eyes, which are black-grey and veiled in purple, "there is so much snow, maybe you shouldn't go away today?" he kisses her on the mouth, "I must leave." He hitches himself to his two crates and tows them in the snow to the trolley station. At the end of winter, when the snow melts, Ferenc returns and finds in their tiny home a baby called Katalin, Kata.

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I saw many images of the couple in Pesterzsébet, like the snapshot of Ferenc, the handsome talker, where he puts on his heavy coat to leave on his winter trip and suddenly takes it off, pulls Vera to him and crushes her breast, "come, one more time before Kata wakes up..." But I became very tired, my eyes burned, and my hands grew heavy on the keyboard. Shall I call Avry? He will come and charge me with energy... No... it has been less than two weeks since he was here last, better not call him. I turned to my five Deceased. Old-Prince-Shaul sat in old people's peace of mind, his long body slack and his lower lip droopy. "I have no energy," I said to him and he straightened and gathered his lip.

"You do look tired, love of my heart," he said, and his quiet voice sounded as if it emerged from a very dry mouth. His Israeli pathos of the forties of the twentieth century never seemed preposterous to me, though at this moment it sounded pathetic. It doesn't matter, I was tired of writing and needed him to give me a boost. Old-Prince-Shaul smiled generously and quoted his usual declaration he made when he was alive, with eyes closed and an enthused sigh, "I love you so much!"

And it worked immediately. I read the last lines in my text and a sharp pleasure ran through me, as though I was Vera lying with Ferenc on their bed before he went on the road. Ferenc moved his lips from her face to her throat, slowly-slowly lower-lower. "Continue like this," I hummed, "simply continue like this."

## White Orchid

Faint daylight trickles into the small grocery store through the doorway. Vera stands on the far side of the wooden counter, which is old and worn but clean, and it is obvious that the stains on it are from times before it arrived at her store. On the counter there is a scale with weights next to it, and on the wall behind Vera there are two shelves. On one of them stand a few jam jars, arranged by height, and on the other wooden boxes and cloth bags containing coffee, lentils, rice and other grains. A cabinet with spices and medicine is attached to the wall next to the door, and under it, on the floor, rest three large bags with flour, sugar and salt. The store is dark and unaired, but Vera stands there like a white orchid, dressed in one of the dresses she brought from her parents' home. Her face is clean, and her aubergine hair is combed and gathered with a golden pin.

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Kata was the oldest, and a year later Ilona was born. Two years after Ilona, Ernő, a boy, was born, and after his birth Vera avoided any more pregnancies. Nevertheless, in the coming years she yearned to give birth again, but she restrained herself, preferring not to provoke her poverty.

On snowy winter days, when Ferenc went with his crates from village to village and from town to town, she sat with their children in their little home in Pesterzsébet, occasionally wearing coats and scarfs to save on coal, and wrapping themselves with blankets as they sat huddled together on one of the two beds. Vera would tell them many things, from folk tales to historical events, from scientific inventions and important discoveries to current philosophical ideas. The children listened carefully, even if they understood little of all that, and when they grew older she explained to them current affairs and showed them photos of Emperor Franz Joseph sitting on his throne, as they appeared in the newspapers. She also showed them the picture of the Empress's throne, which the Empress did not occupy much. Sometimes Vera sang to her children deliberately and in a strong voice but off key, which made the street dogs howl

to high heaven. And when she spoke of Ferenc her eyes shone. "You'll see, when the snow begins to melt, you will know that papa is on his way home!" When Ferenc returned he found the small hut decorated with greenery, full of baking smells, and four pairs of eyes shining happily at him.

"What are you telling me here, Noa?" Editor-Rafi bursts at me, "what's this liquid sugar you pour that will bust your keyboard any minute?! A man leaves a young woman and three children for the whole winter, they hardly have any coal for heating, not a fucking penny to their name, and you expect me to believe that she received him with flowers and a cake in the oven?"

"It's a bit strange, but that is exactly what happened. I think that Vera enjoyed being independent, and clearly preferred to be alone with the children some of the time, without her husband's pestering. This arrangement of parting for the winter suited her. Ferenc chatted endlessly and was not very smart. Rafi, she was a different person, and if you think that there were no such women at the end of the nineteenth century, you are wrong."

During the spring and summer, the children had a father at home, with a strong smell of cigarettes and a strong and hoarse voice. A cuddling father, warm-hearted and talkative, who loved to sing at the top of his lungs, drumming with two metal spoons on a big pot to accompany himself and tell them – in an inarticulate language his wife forgave him for – about faraway cities, about other landscapes and people who spoke foreign languages. "And these people buy your goods?" asked him seven-year-old Kata, in a twelve-year-old's practicality. "Sometimes they buy and sometimes they don't," he replied and raised guilty eyes to Vera.

Ferenc did not speak explicitly about his shady businesses, but Vera understood their nature. During the first years of their marriage she begged him to get rid of them, raised her voice and accused him of irresponsibility. Next to the welcoming receptions which waited for him upon his return, there were also hard rebukes with a firm demand to stay away from what Vera called "the band of criminals." She conducted these conversations far away from the children's ears, and tormented Ferenc with harsh reproaches. He promised again that everything would be fine, but in the end she saw it was in vain and left him alone.

At night they would enter their little kitchen, Vera would cover the entrance with a curtain, and they would stretch on the straw mattress, which each night would be rolled out and each morning rolled back to lean against the wall. "Remember, the children should not sleep with us in the same room," she whispered to him. Ferenc smiled, and his eyes turned purple, "anything you say," and clutched her in his loving desire which did not wane over the years. To him Vera was a princess, daughter of kings, and he did not understand how he had won her.

Once or twice every summer she left him with the children and went to the centre of Budapest to visit the new art shows and buy a few books and magazines to check the latest fashion. "When the children grow, I will take them with me," she said to him, "now it is too early for them."