

The Refugee's First Christmas

A Christmas Story by Paul C. Hayes, 1989

It may well have been the coldest winter in a generation. The year was 1989. Certainly, in the Transylvanian mountains of Romania the villagers had rarely seen the snow pile up so quickly, nor felt the frigid temperatures deprive them of needed comfort in the days of early December. But then, this unusually bitter cold merely reinforced the harsh, unrelenting climate of a repressive Romanian world where the rule of a tyrant chilled an ancient land.

For Maria and Iosif Tőkés December was the cruellest month. The period of the winter solstice included the anniversaries of the deaths of Iosif's mother and that of Maria's younger sister, who died from exposure in her family's apartment—a shelter, like so many, deprived of heating fuel during the economic austerity program enforced by the government. December was also when Iosif had been arrested ten years earlier for publicly criticizing security police for destroying a small Orthodox church in a nearby village. He spent the next two Decembers in a detention camp for his "unfortunate opinion."

As the autumn leaves gave way to the cold and snow of winter, Maria and Iosif feared another period of bleakness and despair, for Romanian society was agitated by the instability caused by reforms in the neighboring countries of Hungary, Bulgaria and, of all places, the Soviet Union. Reform was desperately needed in Romania as well, perhaps even more than anywhere else, but Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* were not welcomed by the despotic regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, which uncharacteristically condemned Soviet reforms in the state press.

Daily, Iosif would come home from work reporting to Maria of growing dissent at the factory—the “cooperative” where hundreds of workers routinely made worthless objects out of wood for export to western Europe, instead of worthwhile goods for their own people. The capital returned in trade was never reinvested in his workplace or the laborers, thus his daily routine seemed no less than a regimented march to a waiting tomb.

Life was predictably hard. But no matter how frustrated Iosif became with his world, he could not express it, for he knew he was constantly monitored by nameless eyes and ears. He could not chance being rearrested, for Maria—his wife of less than a year—was now pregnant with their first child. In the primitive conditions of modern Romania, she could die at childbirth were someone not there to watch over her. Maria wanted him to be true to his conscience, but Iosif knew he must remain quiet and complacent to be true to his family.

So, it was somewhat of a surprise when on the evening of the sixth of December, Iosif came to bed and whispered to his half-asleep wife that they had no choice but to escape west to Hungary. In recent weeks he had been listening to his short-wave radio to broadcasts from Budapest and Radio Moscow. How things had changed! How much more they could have if they were to leave Romania! It was time to leave for the sake of their newborn, before the child became addicted to the same despair.

Iosif had it all planned out in his mind as Maria sat up immediately, not certain of what she had heard. He explained that they could easily acquire an internal visa from an acquaintance in the government bureau in order to travel to Oradea, a city near the Hungarian border. There they would try to make it to a rural road that crossed near enough to escape

under the cloak of darkness. Once inside Hungary, they would try to journey to Debrecen, his ancestral home. In Debrecen, they could file for political asylum as refugees; he would take his prison release papers along to ensure his credibility. Since Hungarian and Romanian relations were in such a cold state over the harassment of Hungarian nationals in Romania, there would be little possibility of deportation.

The child in Maria's womb had a sudden move and she jerked in surprise. Her ambiguous expression of concern and bewilderment led Iosif to believe that he was terribly wrong to suggest escaping now. The travel alone would be particularly stressful on Maria in her condition. He shook his lowered head and muttered, "I'm sorry. I didn't think about how hard this would be upon you and the baby." Maria compassionately took his hand and slowly lifted her head, peering deeply into his darkened eyes. "Iosif, because of the child, we must go. We will find a way to make it. We must trust God."

Maria held onto her childhood religious lessons from church, though Iosif had long abandoned them. Orthodox priests were no more than Ceausescu's eyes and ears, as far as Iosif was concerned—agents of the Securitate, who paid them well for information. He had also prayed when he was a child, believing in the impossible. When it never came, he found no use in it. However, out of love he would not deprive Maria of her beliefs.

Neither one was sure what they were about to do; yet, neither one could remain the same. For in the silent darkness of that early December night, an angel-like brightness took residence somewhere in her innocence, which cast the light of hope upon his own beleaguered soul. As Maria said, God would be with them; perhaps this time, their child of hope was a sign of divine care.

A young woman will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him “Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:23)

When the train methodically pulled into the Oradea station, Iosif and Maria apprehensively collected their belongings. All of their life was contained in two small suitcases. That is all they could possibly carry; but then, that is all they cared to bring as well.

It was not difficult to find a ride toward the countryside near the border, for all people everywhere have room in their heart for a young pregnant woman and her husband. So, a late-middle-aged pensioner offered them a lift, which Iosif gratefully accepted.

Iosif shrewdly chose not to disclose their plans or destination—one does not do that to a stranger in Romania—but the driver knew why they were in Oradea in December. “The border’s been closed,” he matter-of-factly reported to his passengers. “The Securitate have barricaded all roads to Hungary.”

He could tell by the startled reaction of his rider, that Iosif was not expecting—nor wanting—to hear this. “Yes, trouble in some of the cities. I believe there was a large demonstration in Timisoara—some say there were many killed by the police—blood running through the streets. But the radio reports that it was fascist rebels responsible. You know what they say. Ahh... who knows? It was bound to happen sooner or later. Nothing will ever change in Romania without bloodshed.”

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning. Rachel is weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.

(Matthew 2:18)

Iosif said not a word. His pensive stare at the road ahead seemed to confirm to the driver that it was all right to go on.

“If you want to get out, I can help you.”

Iosif glanced at the man, but said nothing. Suddenly, Maria let out a moan. Iosif turned to her, breaking his anxious silence. Maria reassured him, “It’s only the baby moving, Iosif.” Then, with words of counsel, she whispered, “Let’s take this as a sign to go on.”

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice, she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.

(Luke 1:41-45)

The driver knew what he was doing as if he had performed this act of mercy many times before. They left the main highway outside Oradea and slowly drove without lights onto a poorly plowed dirt road. They travelled on for what seemed to be an hour, but in fact, was much less.

The driver slowed the car and pointed to a distant light across a barren field. “It’s only a kilometer, but there’s Hungary.” Then in a reflective tone of voice, “It’s only a kilometer, but it’s a long, long way from Romania.”

Iosif and Maria offered the driver a token gift to thank him for his extraordinary—and unlikely—help. But he refused them, and instead handed them a pair of wire cutters, and a small loaf of bread and a flask of wine.

“Here, you need these to survive the night. Now move quickly, for the border patrol comes through here every hour to check for footprints. Now that they have closed the borders, they won’t give you the chance to repent.”

Iosif and Maria knew precisely what the driver meant by this. The would-be strangers exchanged farewells in the darkness and the child’s

parents proceeded across the snow-laden field, fighting against the elements that both nature and humanity could inflict upon them.

God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

(Isaiah 40:29-31)

The strain of oppression yields itself with every snap of the barbed wire along the boundary between Romania and Hungary. How it was that these sojourning pilgrims could arrive at the border precisely between patrols, allowing enough time for them to escape, can only be properly termed a “holy coincidence”—a holy relief. Maria and Iosif arrived in Hungary on a cold December evening, on a night which promised the warmth of hope and deliverance.

The night, however, was not without its certain pain. In the enervating stress of escaping through the barbed wire barricades along the border, Maria suddenly felt the premature throes of labor. At first, she thought it was merely exhaustion; her adrenalin alone could make up for fatigue. But the pain became more intense and paralyzing. She could no longer run; she could not muster the strength to go on.

Iosif panicked, for he knew that along the border shelter was scarce to find. At any time they could be spotted, and the thought of dying at the merciless hands of even Hungarian border security was a fear that spun his mind into near frenzy. He carried his beleaguered wife across the open field, and successfully so, into a small nest of trees. There they remained for a while, seemingly unnoticed; Iosif found himself doing something he had not done for years: he uttered a prayer for help.

Maria's labor could not be denied. Iosif recognized that he had to find shelter for when she delivered. Yet, where could they go? In the agonizing cry of a desperate man, Iosif pleaded to the night's skies: "God, how can this be...that on this night when you have safely brought us this far, that now my wife and I, and our child, are abandoned to die here in this cold, barren field? Why have you done this to us?"

Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord and my way disregarded by my God?" Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God will not grow tired or weary, and God's understanding no one can fathom.

(Isaiah 40:27-28)

Iosif had carried Maria nearly two kilometers when he spotted the shadowed outline of distant buildings—a collective farm with barns for shelter. In that early December morning, Iosif and Maria finally reached their destination—Iosif quietly sliding the barn door open to allow them to slip inside unnoticed by the world around.

In the protective shelter of the barn, midst the relative warmth and stench of beast-trodden hay—a fortress lined with tractors and farm equipment standing orderly and erect like sentries guarding a palace—there, Maria and Iosif miraculously delivered their first child into the world. Through the course of an adventurous night, one new life had ushered in the presence of another.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned...For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. (Isaiah 9:2,6)

The early morning light of dawn peeked around the edges of the barn door as Maria, Iosif, and their newborn child huddled in the diminishing darkness. The precarious conditions of that morning threatened both the life of their child and their own safety as refugees. But then, their utter

fatigue and a strange sense of divine governance kept them sheltered quietly in that place of peace.

God, indeed, was with them, as Iosif quietly pondered the last 24 hours in his mind. Then, as if the angels of heaven were orchestrating the events of that morning, the families of the collective found them, but were not angered, nor threatened by the presence of these two—now three—refugees. Maria, Iosif, and the child were carefully and compassionately ushered into one of the cottages, where they were cared for by the family as if they were one of their own.

Iosif did not need to explain their circumstances; the local villagers intuitively understood where they came from and even who they were, as they had heard the Christmas story told from one generation to another, in all of its magnificent grandeur, in all of its simple human beauty. Some even believed in it.

That was the spirit by which all people reached out to this refugee family in the days to come. Visitors came from all around to hear the ancient story once again—retold, reimagined, and remembered. Near Christmas day, their joy was magnified by word that the Ceausescu regime in Romania had rapidly fallen and that it would soon be safe for them to return to their native land—a dream that seemed impossible to believe just a few weeks before. But Iosif, in particular, kept close to his heart all the events of this time as a possible sign of God’s wondrous miracles—a miracle for Romania. And it was if a measure of innocent childhood belief somehow crept back into his heart.

So he got up, and took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

(Matthew 2:14,15)

And Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.
(Luke 2:19)

On Christmas day, the church bells tolled in the local Hungarian village, and for the first time in their lives, Iosif and Maria heard the sounds of unrestricted, hope-filled freedom. Their joy replaced their long-held fear and distrust; their darkness and despair gave way to the light of the world.

But on that holy Christmas morn, across another barren field in a different land, barbed wire remained callously in place. The border patrol maintained a pernicious watch and the walls of oppression were fortified by other tyrants and their fearful rule.

The cries of Rachel are heard in the distance—weeping and mourning the loss of the children of tyranny and the people who remain in the cold, December darkness. Until the walls come down, Rachel refuses to be comforted, for her mourning must be heard by all the world.

Yet, despite the cold December nights which chill the mortal world, the choirs of angels can still be heard singing their carols across the fruitless plain—brightening the landscape of life with songs of joy and offering consolation with hymns of lamentation. For the ancient story of the Christ Child of Bethlehem is retold to each generation—those who have ears to hear—offering everlasting hope and peace to all who watch and wait for the blessed Savior's birth.

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