

Dear friends and brothers and sisters in Christ,

Greetings from Hungary!

Maria and I want to apologize for waiting so long to write to you. I planned to write in September when we had finished moving in to our new “home away from home” in Tapolca, Hungary. However, in late August things became extremely busy.

First of all, let me reassure everyone that we are alright. One could say that these past few months have been stressful, but that is not exactly true. There have been many personal and professional challenges, unexpected obstacles, etc., but through it all, we have been blessed with an astonishing degree of peace. Corrie Ten Boom, who lived through much greater challenges during World War 2 and the Nazi occupation of Holland, as well as more than a year in German concentration camps, once said that regardless of external circumstances, the safest place to be is in the middle of God’s will. So, despite our circumstances, we have protection, blessing, and provision.

First of all, let me set the stage by reminding you (or, perhaps informing you) that Hungary’s history has been quite tumultuous and filled with major disappointments and setbacks. From about 1450 to 1602, the Turkish forces of the Ottoman Empire invaded and occupied about half of Hungary, killing or kidnapping almost 50% of the native population. They destroyed or rebuilt churches into mosques. The king of Hungary was killed during this occupation, so it was during this time that Hungary allied itself with Austria to keep the Turks from pushing farther into Europe. While this did lead to the defeat of the Ottoman forces, the so-called Austro-Hungarian Empire was not an equilateral union. The Austrians lorded it over Hungary and used their land and people for taxes, agricultural and mineral resources, and draftees for the enormous military. Hungary tried on two separate occasions to declare independence from Austria and was met with force resulting in defeat. Several of Hungary’s most revered leaders died in exile outside of their homeland because they were declared “rebels” by the Austrian government. In fact, the school where I teach is named Batsanyi Janos (Bot-shine-yi Yaw-nosh) after one of Hungary’s patriots who died in exile in 1845 for promoting Hungarian independence.

The 20th century was even worse: A major defeat in World War 1 resulted in a loss of almost 2/3 of Hungary’s territory when France and England teamed up to punish the losers. Then, during World War 2, the Hungarian prime minister felt the choice of joining with Russian Communists or Fascist Germany was so hopeless, he committed suicide. His successor chose Nazi Germany because he believed it to be the lesser evil; plus, the Nazis promised to help Hungary regain its lost territory. Under Nazi leadership, Hungary deported over 600,000 Hungarian Jews to Nazi concentration camps, where they were eventually murdered. Near the end of the war, the Russian army invaded and “liberated” Budapest. However, they remained to occupy, and Hungary became an unwilling member of the Soviet Union until 1990. A sense of pessimism, even fatalism, has pervaded much of Hungarian society due to these years of hardship, loss, and disappointment.

Since 1990, Hungary has made great advances, but it still struggles to catch up with France, Germany, Austria, and England. Then, the COVID 19 pandemic was a major blow to the economy, and now the war of Russia versus Ukraine and the associated sanctions have caused terrible inflation. The Hungarian currency has lost half of its value in the last 2 years and the cost of groceries has more than doubled. Meanwhile, wages for most people have remained fixed for the last 20 years.

And what about schools here? Of course, there are similarities, with 6 to 7 class periods a day per day, similar school subjects, etc. I have noticed (as have other American teachers living here) that in the USA, teachers are viewed as helpers and advocates for students, while in Hungary, there is a more rigid hierarchy. Many teachers here yell and berate students to a degree that I never heard working in Mount Vernon and Stanwood-Camano. In fact, I have raised my voice and even shouted to get the attention of some groups because this is how they have been conditioned to respond. Every week I earnestly pray that students will notice that I am genuinely there for them, that I want to help, that I believe they have real potential. Even after I discipline them, the moment they are ready to cooperate and learn, I am there to encourage them. On this note, allow me to say a big THANK YOU to all the teachers, school administrators, and paraeducators at OSLC. Your faith and your daily witness through your attitude, your love for the students, your patience, etc. – matters. Where Christians live out their faith in the community at large, the culture changes. I also want to say THANK YOU to the youth of

OSLC. As a regular substitute teacher, I saw first-hand how your faith gives you an extra maturity, a vision for scholastic excellence, and compassion for your classmates. When you speak to your teachers and administrators with respect, when you lift up your classmates who are struggling with a word of encouragement, and the like, you are living out the teachings of Jesus Christ. I can promise you that you are an inspiration to your teachers.

Meanwhile, there are also challenges on the home front. Maria's sister, Livia, is quite ill with Sjögren's Disease (an autoimmune disease) that has gotten much worse this year. We are quite convinced that it is due to the stress of some major conflicts within the family that have led to bitter feelings and unforgiveness. Last year, for example, they could not all sit at one table for Christmas and split into two groups. The irony is, the one member of the family who firmly believes in God is unwilling to forgive a past offense and justifies this because the offending party wants nothing to do with God, or, more concretely, organized religion. Into this situation we are trying to speak God's Word and be a bridge. Our vision is to lay a spiritual foundation for reconciliation, but it will require genuine repentance from people filled with pride and self-righteousness. While we don't mean to focus all our effort on the immediate family, Scripture does affirm that love for one another and good deeds begin first within our families (biological and spiritual).

Let me share with you that we have had some struggles, too. When we arrived in Tapolca, we were disappointed to find out that the newly renovated apartment close to the school which had been promised to us was rented out to another party a few months before our arrival. This is not under the control of the school or my sponsoring organization, but the local government/city hall. So, instead we were provided with an apartment on the 6th floor of a downtown, Soviet-era blockhouse. The kitchen is so small that the widest dimension is less than the length of my outstretched arms. The bus station is right below our bedroom window and the early buses leave at 4:30 am (so the noise starts around 4 am) and goes until 10 pm. This makes sleeping soundly a challenge at times. For the first few days after finding out about this, we were terribly disappointed. Some of our Hungarian friends complained that this type of attitude is why Hungary is stuck behind – they invite guests from abroad and treat them poorly. One relative advised us to complain and demand something better. But we were reminded of Paul's letter to the Philippians (chapter 4) where he writes that he learned to live both with abundance and with little. We simply decided that through the Spirit of Christ in us, we would learn to live with little, and make that simple apartment our home. And, glory be to God, we are now very grateful for our cozy apartment.

On the plus side, Tapolca is in a geographically beautiful part of Hungary, close to Lake Balaton, historic castles/fortresses, with opportunities for bicycling and hiking just beyond our doorstep, so to speak. We have not even explored the underground lake that is actually just below the downtown, where visitors can paddle through the winding cave passages.

While Maria is now on her home territory, there are times when I wonder if I have lost my mind. The transition has been sudden and a bit drastic. We are no longer living on our family farm, we are far from all of you, and yet I know that we are called to be here at this time, of that I am certain. We often hear people relate a story of how they met a challenge in their life and all the details fell miraculously into place. "It was a God-thing," they say. We have had many of those moments, even here. But even when we meet with resistance and obstacles, we are not overly discouraged. In fact, Maria and I recall hearing a pastor say earlier this year that if we never meet with resistance in our lives, it is likely because we are going in the same direction as Satan! This requires discernment: are our difficulties because God wants to steer us in a different direction, or are they because Satan wants to stop what God wants to accomplish through our obedience? I am certain many if not all of you have experienced the same.

There is more we could say, but this is enough for one letter.

We wish all of you a most blessed Thanksgiving and Christmas.

In Christ,

Arnold and Maria Ronning