

**MY LIFE,
THE CIRCUS**
THE AMAZING STORY OF ISTVÁN KRISTÓF

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“Yearn for success!”
ISTVÁN KRISTÓF

”

These days I always dream of the circus,
I don't remember exactly where it was, only that
it was like an island, with some large stones lying there.

I thought that if someone
removed the boulders,
what a nice little circus space it could be.

In another dream, I was in a travelling circus
and there was water flowing through the ring.

It also made me angry how damned crooked
the entire space was. It was pouring rain outside,
and it was flowing through the circus,
washing the sawdust out of the ring.

I often dream of the circus,
and I believe this is natural,
since I was always part of the circus.

The fact that physically I live
in Sashalom Street
is just a small matter.

For I still live in the circus.

I still have my trunk and travel bag ready to go
in the corner of the room,
and I'm still waiting for the contract,
when to pack, when to head off...

”

Foreword

The circus is a special world. Space that is simultaneously open and enclosed, with special laws and inhabited by people with seemingly strange ways of looking at things. It has been welcoming everyone without prejudice for centuries, but it always imposes one condition: to love and respect the circus.

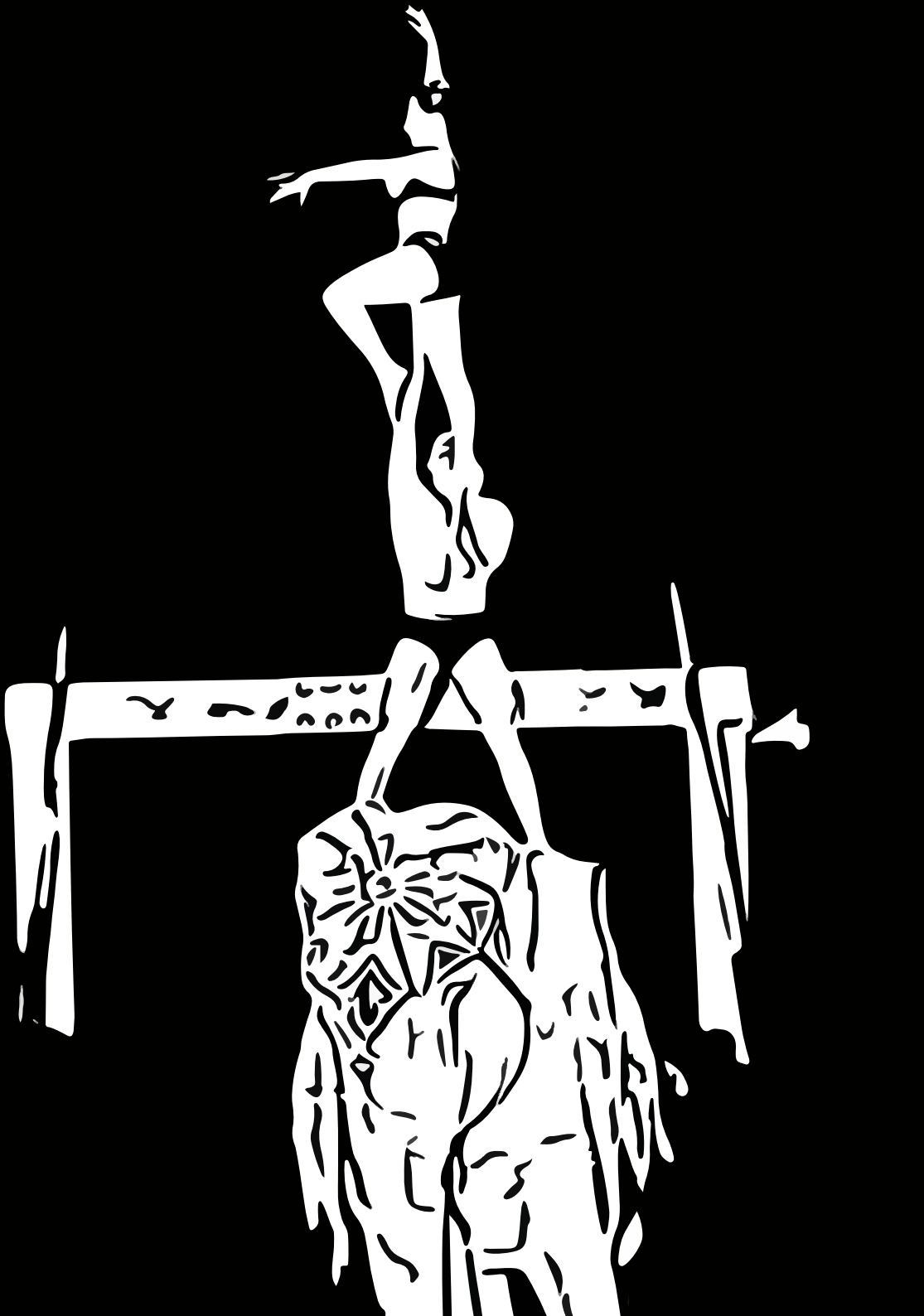
With the passage of time, many things change in the world and in our society, and the world of the circus is no exception. Questioned and sometimes exploited by politics, it is a community that has, more than anything else, taught itself how to survive from day to day. We are strange people, at the same time both citizens of the world and the world's vagrants, who are at home anywhere, but really nowhere at all. There is one single sure point and place in our lives: the circus. It is a sanctuary for us that provides security, a livelihood and, last but not least, joy. There are values whose preservation might be essential for the future. It is a relic for those of us who want to build the future without forgetting the past.

On 11 September 2021, my father celebrated his 80th birthday. May God bless him with many more! To me, he is much more than simply a father. He is my best friend and indisputably my greatest teacher. I feel lucky to have been able to grow up in a circus where my destiny was, to all intents and purposes, decided in advance.

This book offers a glimpse into the wonderful and mysterious world of the circus through the lens of my father's 80-year-long journey in life. Furthermore, it also has a mission. It is important for my dad's professional values and everything that his spirit represents in circus art to be preserved.

I recommend this book to readers who love the circus and are curious about the challenges an acrobat faces in life, as well as how this exceptionally beautiful craft teaches you to struggle, create, live and love.

Kristian Kristof



CHAPTER ONE

MY CHILDHOOD

A “komédiás”. That’s what I am. This is the world I grew up in. What is a “komédiás”? The closest equivalent in English is “showman”, but it means much more in Hungarian. It implies a complete and utter dedication to a certain lifestyle. It means sharing a commitment with companions – often but not always connected by blood – to the life of the circus. Many people use this word in a pejorative sense, but I’m extremely proud of my roots. And who were my forebears? Fairground entertainers who travelled from town to town in horse-drawn caravans, accompanying the famous 19th-century actress and singer Déryné on her tours around the empire. This is the world I come from too. I was born inside a circus wagon three and a half metres long and pulled by a single horse while it was parked in the Keszthely city marketplace. So if anyone can call himself a komédiás, it’s me. Thinking back on my childhood, I can say that I’ve lived a very good life.

I remember the family holidays, since back then we celebrated Christmas the same way we do now, even though we didn’t receive big gifts. “It’s wintertime, so we’d better keep the kids warm!” is how our parents’ thinking went, so neither I nor my little sister Panni were ever even slightly surprised when we found shoes, a sweater or a coat under the tree. She never got my hand-me-downs, because she refused to wear anything that “belonged to Pityu”, my nickname. This is just the way our life was. Circus kids generally got practical items as gifts. I remember how my father returned from his first tour abroad, around West Germany, with the surprise gift of a Hohner accordion. Why an accordion? Because he

wanted to encourage us to study music. Okay, we were also given roller skates at one point. But even these were not meant for us to amuse ourselves rolling back and forth on the street. It was so we could perform a roller-skating act for the circus. You have to hand it to him: my old man had some great ideas! I could only dream of a bike. I really wanted one, but never got my wish. I understood the reason, because it makes sense: what would a circus kid do with a bike? The circus tent was usually set up in a grassy, bumpy area: terrain that was inherently unsuitable for biking. And where would I have put it when we were travelling? It would not have fit in the caravan. So it would have been useless for me, wouldn’t it? I accepted the fact that, as a circus lad, my life was different from those of “civilian” children. Even with my young mind, I had to think more maturely than them and acknowledge that there was no point in longing for certain things, because there was simply no place for them in my life. On the other hand, a kid is still just a kid, even if he’s a responsible member of the circus. When I really wanted to ride a bike, I borrowed one from the local youngsters. In exchange, I let them into the circus to watch a performance. I think everyone involved did pretty well out of this business arrangement!

But I wasn’t always on friendly terms with the local kids. If I noticed that someone had “just happened” to crawl under the wallings to sneak in for a performance without purchasing a ticket, then you can be certain that my fists were there at my disposal to explain to them that this was not such a good idea. During this stage of my childhood, I learned to fight very well. My God, we scuffled a lot!

So looking back at it now, I can say that this way of life was a very important and valuable school, because as circus kids grow up, it teaches us many things that will be useful later on in life: to protect our interests, to stand on our own two feet and, last but not least, to learn to adapt. For example, I had long been able to sleep in the

glare of headlights or with the sound of the lion roaring. Even the clatter of the primitive “Brezhnev” stove heating, the railway carriage didn’t bother me when we were waiting for the caravan to be towed to the train station – even the din it made while in transit was so awfully loud that most people couldn’t stand it when they were awake. But not me. I slept right through it many times. These times were also always pleasant ones back then, because it meant that the entire family could be together. The caravans were tiny. Ours had one bedroom with three beds: two small ones in the back for my sister and me, and a third big one where my parents slept. On the other side of the partition, there was a little kitchen with a small stove. We also had a table and a kind of sofa that we could sit on. We washed in a washbasin: that was our bathroom. The toilet was outside, in the yard, behind a bush or a tree. We didn’t listen to the radio or watch television when I was a child. It’s hard for people today, so accustomed to comfort, to imagine this, isn’t it? Yet at that time, this was normal: we travelling *komédiások* and circus people in general lived that way. We kids were always shooed out to play in the yard after breakfast. If we weren’t in school, the circus area was our playground. What freedom we had! I remember the taste of Elza Eötvös’s (the wife of Nándor Eötvös, founder of the Eötvös Circus and the mother of my friend Jóska) bread and dripping: I really ate a lot of that!

It so happened that our troupe, the Richter Circus, often met with the Eötvös Circus during the summer at Lake Balaton. At such times, we would play with Jóska, who – despite being a year older – was very similar to me: we both had blond hair and dressed much the same: bare feet and cotton shorts.

“Jóska!” Elza would shout whenever she noticed that we were playing together. And then she would invite me to have some bread and dripping too. Decades later, I asked Elza if she remembered those

days. Laughingly, she said, “Of course I remember you, you little rascal!” And indeed she was right: Jóska was really the good kid, because when it came to making mischief or climbing a tree, I was always the instigator!

Even though we lived through many hard times, I remember being a happy kid. I was also relatively diligent, as far as school was concerned. It didn’t take me long to memorise the poems we had to learn, and I still remember a fair number of them; I liked maths and history, although it’s true that I only paid attention to the parts that interested me. We didn’t attend school the way other kids did anyway, because circus kids only ever went to school for a few days at a time wherever the company happened to pitch its tent. Then we packed up and travelled on. I already had my routine down pat: arriving at the given school hand in hand with whoever was looking after me, I’d say, “Hello. Our circus is going to be performing here for three days, so I’m here to study.” Then the teacher would sit me down in the classroom and write in my official record book: “István Kristóf, Keszthely, joined our class between 8 and 13 September.” To tell you the truth, we circus kids were always a big hit at schools: “curiosities”, so to speak. Our new classmates were glad to see us, because while we were there, no one had to study. “The circus kid is here! This is great! Tell us some stories!” the fellows would say, and sure enough even the teacher would be curious to hear about our lives. Everyone found them interesting. Then on the last day we spent there, somehow, we were always awarded top marks.

I would be lying, though, if I said that everything went smoothly at school, because I really did have problems with the Hungarian language. Except there was nothing I could do about this. At home, it was a unique, mixed language that was spoken around me. Part of our family was Swabian, and the other half, the Winiczki side, was

Czech in origin, so they always threw a few foreign words – Czech and German – into whatever they were saying, with even some of the Hungarian words being mispronounced. Time and again, teachers at school would ask me, “Can’t you hear that there is a double “t” in this word?”

“No,” I would answer. And this certainly did not change later on, either. I still have problems with Hungarian grammar to this day. Fortunately, my parents didn’t mind when – due to the language difficulties – I sometimes didn’t perform so well at school, since they knew I wasn’t going to become a doctor or a scientist. I too was preparing for a life in the circus, which required diligence. And that I did have. It was an unknown concept for us to not feel like doing something at the circus. Such an idea would never have occurred to me: it’s an attitude that I never understood! I was always told to “Go practise!” or “Come on, help pull down the tent!”, and no one pestered me about studying or doing my homework. Children born into the circus have a straight path ahead of them anyway: into this world I was born, this is my life, and here I have to create something beautiful, some kind of attraction that will get me into the Capital Circus of Budapest!

Our childhood was not an ordinary one in any respect.

Unlike children today, we didn’t listen to music all day long, and we didn’t have telephones either. All we had was a radio, but I didn’t listen to that, either: only my old man did, and just to hear the news. I don’t mean to condemn today’s world. But if someone were to ask me if I would trade my childhood for that of a ten-year-old today, there would be no question about it: absolutely not! As I see it, children these days are nowhere near as happy as we were. We valued different things. For example, I remember Ottó Czája, a dear fellow who, in addition to being an acrobat and the son of the circus director, was very good at driving a tractor. (When the

circus journeyed onward, he was the one who towed the caravans to the station.) I had an excellent relationship with Ottó, and we made a splendid deal with each other: in exchange for delivering his love letters to his sweetheart Tona, I would get to drive the tractor after the tent was pulled down. That was a marvellous experience for me, as a child!

I can honestly say I wouldn’t trade places with anyone, because I have had a very good life. My parents cared for me just as much as they needed to. Well, all right, looking at it as an adult today, I know that my dad didn’t go to excessive lengths to raise me. It is true, however, that when he saw the need for it, he was there for me and helped out. But the rest of the time he let me do as I pleased.

As a small child, of course, I saw him differently. Because God had blessed my father with astonishing physical strength, and in my eyes, he was the one who knew everything and could defeat anyone. I’ve heard many stories about his awesome power. For example, when the tyre of the lorry used to transport the seating and other heavy equipment was punctured, and they didn’t have the jack to hand, my old man simply lay down underneath the chassis and lifted it up with his feet so that his companions could replace the wheel. According to another anecdote, in Slovakia, when three certain Hungarian acrobats got into an exchange of words with seven tough local lads, the situation ended with the pub’s furnishings being completely demolished. My father threw one of the bold gents so high up in the air that he left his footprints on the ceiling. These marks were retained and pointed out for years as a local curiosity. And I was also told how, when a thief was caught prowling around the temporary circus grounds, my father found a most original way of keeping him immobile: he bent out two bars of the iron fence, shoved in the scoundrel’s head, and then pushed the bars back into place around his neck. So no one had to wait there watching over the thief until

the police arrived, as no matter how hard he tried, he could not free his head from the fence. I think that's how legends are born.

My father was a remarkable person, one with his own story.

He was born in the United States, to emigrant parents. His father, my grandfather Mátyás Kristóf, was also extremely strong, and worked as a miner. After his wife, my grandmother Rozália Steiner, became ill and died, my grandfather packed up his belongings and returned to Europe with his three children. They ended up settling in France, in Metz, to be precise. This move led to a sad episode in the lives of the children, that is, for my father. My grandfather's new French girlfriend had no affection for her newfound little ones and got rid of them as quickly as possible. The two girls were placed in a seamstress shop, and my father, who was already strong as a child, was taken on to serve as an apprentice to a blacksmith. Back then, this wouldn't have been considered unusual at all: it was normal for children to work.

It was the circus that changed my father's life.

The city of Metz, where he lived, was frequently visited by travelling circuses. As a young lad working in a blacksmith's shop, my father was dazzled by this world. And then he was literally enchanted by it. As the story has it, he would have been around 15 years old when he befriended the circus' stable master while the troupe was in town. This friendship led to my father absconding from the blacksmith and joining the circus. His foster parents didn't make a big deal out of his disappearance. "If the kid's gone, then he's gone," they thought, and back then, this is indeed how things like this were handled. They didn't care where he was, who took him away, or what happened to him. Nor did they search for him.

My father was quickly adopted by the circus, finding his place in his new home. Like the other kids, he helped wherever help was needed, as a travelling circus always has plenty of work to do. As he

groomed the horses and cleaned up after the lions and the elephant, he slowly but surely learned everything there was to know about caring for circus animals. The truth is, however, that he would only put this knowledge to use much later on, when he spent years working with an elephant named Aida, because here at the very beginning, he had his heart set on something entirely different.

Appearing at this French circus at that time between the world wars was a fellow named Breibart, who was billed as "the world's strongest man". My father enjoyed this act, and since he himself was, at age 17, physically powerful beyond his years, it gave him a few ideas: "Well then," he thought, "I could do that too." And he started to practise. He came up with some highly spectacular stuff. Like iron bending, for example. First, he hit his thigh with an iron rod, which made it bend a little bit. Then he pressed it against his knee with two hands and bent it further. Then he placed it between his thighs and completely crushed the iron rod – 32 centimetres long and 16 millimetres thick – into a horseshoe shape. The audience, of course, couldn't believe what they were seeing. They thought it was just a trick, an illusion. So my dad handed the rod over to them so that they could see if they could bend it further. Of course, no one ever could, since my father really was that strong. There was no deception involved! He had other stunts too. Such as the "Iron Ball", when he bent it on his lower arm, and the "Spiral", when he put it in his mouth and bent it into a "Z" shape. Then he kept on folding it until it took on the shape of a treble clef.

Dad was constantly expanding his repertoire, pushing his own limits. For example, with his "board of nails" number, which was actually more of a fakir-type trick. After lying down on a board bristling with protruding nails, he would have another similar board placed face down on his chest. And on top of that, his assistants would position an anvil. Then he would ask a member of the audience – because he

always invited one of the viewers to do this – to strike the anvil several times with a ten-kilogramme hammer. It’s hair-raising just to think about, isn’t it? In his “Rock” act, he used some kind of self-hypnosis, so to speak, and leaned his entire weight on two sharp-edged plates: one went under his neck, supporting his body, and the other under his calves. Then his assistant placed a rock weighing 100-150 kilos on my father’s belly and proceeded to hit it until it shattered into pieces. His grand finale was the “Ringenspiel” (or “Carousel”), in which he strapped two audience members together and then hoisted them up into the air and sent them spinning. When he eventually lowered them back down and released them, one or both would inevitably fall flat on their faces, drawing a big laugh from the audience. As we say in circus-speak, this was a nice little “comedy trick” to conclude the act with. Needless to say, my old man was always a huge hit.

Years later, when he returned to Hungary from France as a skilled performer, he signed with the Richter Circus. That’s where he met my beloved mother, who was still 17 years old at the time. My mother fell right in love with the strong, handsome circus artist.

My mother – her name was Anna Winiczki – was born into a small travelling circus. Since at that time, many people never bothered getting married, she didn’t end up taking the surname of my grandfather, János Richter. Instead she was named after my grandmother, who was also called Anna Winiczki. In truth, my grandmother had been involved with a previous partner named Rudolf Stancer, who fathered two boys with her. Later on, she met Grandpa Richter, somewhere around the city of Zalaegerszeg. They fell for each other and ended up travelling on together. So my mother was born into the Richter Circus, and that’s where she grew up. She was an aerial acrobat and a static trapeze artist. After she and my father fell in love, her acrobatic career came to an end, because we children

started arriving, starting with me in 1941, followed by my little sister Panni in 1943. Fourteen years later, in 1955, we were joined by our little brother, Zsolt.

From that point forward, Mum lived only for us. Our father was the provider for the family, performing as a circus strong man. World War Two, however, turned everything on its head. As an American citizen, he was lucky enough at first to avoid the draft. During those difficult times, everybody eked out a living any way they could. My parents, for example, entertained people in pubs with circus and illusionist acts. Why in pubs? Because back then there were no community cultural centres, and the pubs were what one would call the central places where people gathered. The entertainment programme was always followed by dancing. My mother’s family had a little gramophone with a horn loudspeaker, which they’d use to play my father’s French phonographs. I can remember how much the young adults loved those tunes! We children also did our share of the work, especially later on, after the war. For example, I was the one who handled the gramophone. This was a huge responsibility, as I had to make sure not to damage my father’s records. I remember how carefully I placed the needle on the discs to keep them from being scratched! Of course, I was also naughty sometimes too. I wanted to have some fun with these young adults. They loved fast music, but didn’t know how to move to French tunes. So out of spite, I would put on a slow tango. Then I’d get annoyed with them: “Bugger! They can’t even dance to that!” Although I have fond memories like these, the truth is that this was an extremely difficult period in our lives. We had to make a living from the little money we received from those who could spare a bit to pay for these shows.

Back to my father. Eventually even my father couldn’t stay out of the war: he was enlisted into the army in 1944. Although he hadn’t been called up in the first phases of the conflict, the time came

when no one cared what nationality he was, all that mattered was that he was young and could be sent into combat. What ensued then was a tortuous period in my mother's life. As I was a young child at the time, I have no memories of my own from this period, but on rare occasions, Mum would recount something from these years. From her, I know that everything was taken from us in the period of nationalisation after the war, and we went hungry. She told me how, when she was nursing my sister – two years younger than me – I begged her to let me nurse too. Since there was nothing else to eat, she gave me her mother's milk too, so that I wouldn't starve.

At that time, we were living in a four-metre-long caravan that was heated with a stove. In cold weather, she had to constantly tend to the fire so that we could stay warm inside, and not freeze. On bitterly cold winter nights, my mother stayed up, sitting beside the stove to keep the flames going. Sometimes, overcome with exhaustion, she couldn't manage to stay awake any longer, and the fire went out. By morning, of course it would be completely freezing in the caravan. A few times when we woke up, we even felt our hair slightly frozen to the boards.

After a while, my father returned from the front, having escaped the war intact, although physical danger was not something he feared. He had to stand by his principles and make a decision: so he deserted. Exactly what happened I know only from my father's stories and family legends. Apparently, my father, who could not stand the Germans anyway, was assigned to a joint German-Hungarian unit after being drafted. They were a small team, and their mission was to defend a certain stretch of road in what was then Yugoslavia. As the days went by, more and more soldiers from my father's unit were being shot by partisan snipers while out on patrol. My father cottoned on to the fact that the Germans were

somehow always only sending the Hungarians out on guard duty. Having had enough of this, he began to confer with some of his fellow soldiers. They realised that if things continued like this, their days as living targets would be numbered. So a decision was made: „We're getting out of here!” In order to avoid being caught inadvertently while fleeing, they disabled the „partisan-hunting vehicles”, meaning that they stole the firing pins from their machine guns. This escape took great courage, as they had no way of knowing how the partisans on the other side would react to the sight of the enemy approaching them unarmed and with their hands in the air. My father and his companions were lucky: they were not executed, but their situation as prisoners of war was still highly precarious. Generally speaking, instead of giving their captives a chance to explain themselves, the partisans usually handed them a spade so they could dig their own graves before being shot. Gesturing with their hands and feet, my father and his comrades attempted to explain the reason for their escape, conveying that they had cleared off because, as Hungarians, they had no wish to fight on the side of the Germans. Through a stroke of good luck, one of the Serbian captains there was a teacher of French, and my father was eventually able to make him understand what they were doing there. In fact, my father told him they would be happy to fight alongside the partisans against the Germans. This is how my father and his mates wound up on the other side. They were given guns and joined the partisan unit.

My father spent a little over a year as a Yugoslav partisan soldier, eventually being promoted to the rank of lieutenant. I was a little boy when all this happened, but I clearly remember the cap he brought home from the front as a souvenir. There was a bullet hole in the middle.

My father was proud of what happened. He was proud to have de-

serted. After the war, he was welcomed with open arms to remain in Yugoslavia, but despite his American baptismal certificate and official French papers, he wanted to live in Hungary. With the war over, circus life gradually resumed. The Capital Circus of Budapest opened as well. My father travelled frequently to performances around the country with his fellow acrobats, and these performances were organised by the then-director of the Budapest circus, Ferenc Göndör.

Dad became a huge star at home in Hungary by the late '40s, billed as "Cristoph, the French Hercules, the strongest man in the world," on placards and in cinemas, where he was featured in promotions for the circus shown before the film screenings. Later on, in addition to appearing as a strong-man, he also developed animal acts after being entrusted with caring for the famous elephant Aida. (*I'll write more about her in the next chapter.*)

As a child, I looked up to my father very much, although he was – as they say – a bit of a rogue. He had all kinds of things in his life: mates, freedom and you can bet he attracted the ladies as well. On the other hand, he supported his family honourably. No matter how hard our lives were, we always had something to eat, because my dad worked hard and brought us everything we needed. It was from him that I learned that work is work. It has to be done: no excuses! I remember that he was very strict. My mother and I both addressed him in the third person, using very formal Hungarian. And there was another strange custom in our family too: we didn't eat together. My dad ate dinner alone, while my mother, my sister and I sat down together. Sometimes we ate the same food, and sometimes we ate something different. Now that I think back on it, this seems odd, but it felt natural for us at the time. When it came to administering discipline, my father showed no quarter either, although truth be told I was one hell of a bad kid. "Pityu!"

he would shout after learning of some naughtiness I was up to. It didn't matter where I was going at the time, whenever I heard him bellow my name, I had to run to him as fast as I could. "Go back and try again!" he'd tell me if I didn't arrive speedily enough. With my back straight, I had to stand at attention in front of him, and only then did he tell me what he had heard about me, what my current sin was. Then – Pow! – came the slap, which usually sent me sprawling. Obviously, it wasn't nearly as great a blow as he could have delivered, with his strength, since then my head would have gone flying off. He only ever gave it to me just hard enough to make sure that I would remember. Then, if I happened to flinch back or raised my hand to protect my head, I got another slap. But to my old man's credit, once I got my punishment for something I'd done, he'd never mention the incident again. Never! With the slap, he considered the matter closed.

How much did these slaps hurt as a kid? I got used to them. If I misbehaved, I knew that, well, I guess I'm going to get it again, but I didn't make a fuss about it. My father was strict but fair. In fact, he even defended me when I needed him to! I remember one story when I was amusing myself aimlessly on a street in front of a statue, the pebbles on the ground caught my eyes. They were very nice pebbles, their shapes ideal for playing with, and I tried to juggle them a bit. Then an older man who had noticed what I was doing came over to me, and I still don't understand why, but he tried to chase me away. "You goddamn kid, what are you doing here? You're making off with the stones!" he shouted angrily. To make his point even clearer, he gave me a good wallop on my back with the spade he was holding in his hands. Well, that's all I needed! I bent down and picked up a large fragment of a brick that was lying there in front of me and threw it right at his head. Then I ran away and didn't stop until I got home. I was out of luck, though,

unfortunately. The man picked up my trail and soon appeared. “Is that blonde blue-eyed kid yours?” he asked my father. “Look what he did to me!” he said, pointing to his bandaged head. “Yes, that child is mine,” my father replied, before paying the man’s medical expenses of one hundred and thirty forints. Afterwards, he asked me, “So what happened, Pityu?” I told him everything, truthfully, exactly the way it happened. He listened patiently, then said simply, “You did the right thing. There’s nothing to worry about. Always make sure to defend yourself, son!” We had a strange relationship. For example, he was the one who taught me how to fish. I have a memory related to this, from 1957, when we were in Poland. I was only sixteen at the time, but I vividly remember that the two of us had gone fishing, and I was terribly proud of myself, because I caught more fish than he did. In plain words: I had defeated my father! Maybe every son has this feeling at some time or another, but for me right then, it was especially pleasing to defeat him.

But to return to the years right after the war: my father quickly sold the American military lorry he had purchased before the nationalisation period and used the money he received for it to buy us an eight-metre-long caravan from Feri Göndör, the director of the Capital Circus of Budapest. It was very modern for the time, because we could all fit into this one comfortably, it had a double wall, and the glass roof could be opened! My father worked a great deal, and his circus contracts often took him on extended engagements abroad. The rest of us stayed home, as we had to go to school. With the family temporarily separated, this created difficulties at a time when there was no telephone, only the post office and letters. My father did, however, come home to visit from time to time. And in 1955 our family expanded with the birth of my brother, Zsolt. I was the one who chose that name for him: one of my classmates at school was called that, and I really liked the name. By today’s

standards, we were already living through almost unimaginably difficult days at the time. In the winter, as we still had no way to heat the tents, the circuses ceased operating, and everyone made a living from seasonal work. My father found a temporary job as a mechanic at the circus site on Hungária Boulevard. He didn’t get much of a choice between tasks to perform. When required, he fixed cars and repaired machinery. At other times he did sewing work on the circus tent. This meant that he earned a small salary during the wintertime as well, and somehow, we made it through this period. Of course, every month when payday came around, my mother would worry about how much of his wages my father was drinking away.

My dear mother raised us with infinite patience. It wasn’t easy for the poor woman that my sister and I were constantly quarrelling, and sometimes we even fought physically. Despite these childish clashes, deep down in our hearts Panni and I adored each other and would never have betrayed each other. We had an Alsatian dog named Gyöngyös (“Pearly”), who was our good pal. We played with her all the time. We especially loved playing hide-and-seek with her. I would climb a tree, concealing myself in its lush foliage. Then my sister would come with the dog and say, “Find Pityu!” No matter how high up I was there, Gyöngyös always found me.

Despite all these hardships, I had a very beautiful childhood. Mum cooked something every day. I can still remember the taste of her food now. Her braised meat was one of my favourite dishes, along with the stew she seasoned with plenty of black pepper and served over macaroni. She often made “floating islands”, a kind of custard and meringue dessert. In summer, she made cold soups from sweet or sour cherries. When money was tight, she cooked pork trotter stew, with plenty of gravy, which I loved to soak up with bread. Although she loved both of us equally, we all still knew that Panni was more of my father’s favourite, while I was my mother’s.

My God! How many times she lied in order to protect me! I must have only been sixteen or seventeen, but I already looked like I was twenty, so I had girls chasing after me. Both good girls and bad girls. “When did Pityu get home?” my father asked. Mum didn’t hesitate: „Oh, he got back well before midnight. At eleven!” Of course, she knew very well that I had been out until six in the morning, but she always served as my accomplice.

She was a beautiful woman! I remember how she wore her medium-length hair pinned to the side in a bun. She was often ill with bile problems that frequently sent her to hospital. At such times, Grandpa Richter usually deposited us at the circus. Sometimes Dad would take us to some distant cousin of his, but this never worked out well, because Panni and I hated being there and did everything we could, including telling lies, just to get out of there. The truth is, my mother also found it more reassuring knowing that we were with Grandpa Richter. There, her sister Böbe took care of us and looked after us, so it was like having a surrogate mother during these periods. Grandma Richter, on the other hand, we tried to avoid and referred to as a witch behind her back.

„You! Yes, you, whatever your name is! Come over here!” she would always say, as she had so many grandchildren, she never learned our names. I have to be honest and say we didn’t love her, but I don’t think anyone loved her, except for Böbe, because she was her favourite daughter. With Grandpa Richter, though, we had a good relationship. It was his habit to whistle for me, and I would run right over to him when I heard the sound, because I knew what that meant: the ice cream van had arrived and Grandpa was going to buy me a treat! He was always kind to me; it didn’t matter to him that I was a bad kid. I also have a Lake Balaton story connected to this. If I remember correctly, the circus was in Balatonszárszó right at this time. I was hanging out with the local kids on the lake shore, where the row-

boats were moored, and noticed that one of them wasn’t tied up so securely. So we undid the rope. We didn’t mean to do anything wrong: we just wanted to go out for a little boat ride. Unfortunately, the owner didn’t see things our way and – bad luck – gave us a good pinch on the ear. Then he asked who lived where. “I’m with the circus,” I answered. So they took me home and told my grandpa what we had done. “Well then, I’m about ready to give you a good slap on the face,” shouted my grandmother. Grandpa immediately rushed to my aid: “Hold on! Hold on! I’ve already given him one!” Because that’s the way Grandpa Richter was. Whenever everyone was scolding me, he – just like my mother – would always stick up for me.

I deeply regret the fact that I wasn’t with my mother when she died. That’s just the way circus life is: when a child grows up, he goes out into the world, and who knows where he is, where he is working at any given time. Along with the beauties of our acrobats’ lives, there also come hardships: we can’t always be there when we need to be. Whenever I was home with her, she always got a little better, taking a bit more pleasure in life. In the summer of 1975, I was working on a contract in the West German city of Darmstadt when my mother died suddenly. While we knew that she was ill, her death came as a surprise. She left us at a very young age: she was only 52 years old.

I loved her very much. I really, really loved her!

After my mother passed away, my father continued on with his life. Our relationship was still strange. I never really knew if he was angry with me for defying him and choosing my own path as an acrobat instead of the one he intended for me. When my son was born – giving my father a grandson – all he said was, “I’m proud of you! You have it all by the age of 28, and now you have a child too.” My father even lived to see me become a circus director. Supposedly he was proud of me for that too, but he never told me. It was only from someone else that I heard that he had said so. As time passed,

we grew apart. Indeed, I could never completely get over the fact that he remarried, taking an eighteen-year-old girl for his wife. Because I loved my mother to the point of adoration, this marriage was unacceptable to me. Still, if my father needed me, I helped him. When he reached retirement age, he quarrelled with “MACIVA”, the Hungarian State Circus company established after the war to oversee circus activities in Hungary, which has existed in various incarnations ever since, so he had to return Aida, the elephant I will tell you about shortly. But he couldn’t stand sitting at home idly for long, so he bought himself a bear and started working in comedy again as an animal trainer. “Why are you doing this?” my sister and I asked him, because we knew he had a pension, and we were helping him financially, so he could have lived comfortably without doing any shows. He looked at us and replied, “Do you want me to go crazy? I need to be active! I need to live and work!” I bought him a minibus so that he would have something to pack the props in, and also a caravan to provide him with relatively normal housing. So I looked after him, because I was able to, but we still maintained a distance between us.

Up until his late seventies, he worked with a level of energy that put much younger people to shame. In addition to animal training, he also resumed working as a strong-man: he’d rotate two people together in the air and bend iron. True, the iron was thinner now, but he still did it!

He was 77 years old when his journey came to an end.

The circus was in the town of Makó at the time. My father finished his performance, carefully packed up his props, then keeled over in his caravan and died. He had suffered a stroke, but it was so severe, the doctors said, that it was all over for him instantaneously. I’ve often thought how lucky the old man was. At his funeral, I said

to myself, “I’d be happy to sign the same contract he did!” Because for circus folk, no death is more beautiful than his. But I’m still alive. And I’m already past my 77th year...

Circus children live in a wonderful world. While other boys of my age begged their parents for a puppy or a kitten, I practically grew up with an elephant. Aida was extremely dear to me. We've heard stories about her past from here and there. Some stories say that she arrived in Hungary from the Heinrich Hagenbeck Zoo in Hamburg in September 1938, while according to another report, she was brought from Southeast Asia by her new owner. (She may even have been brought from there by Hagenbeck's zoo, as it was the largest dealer of wildlife in Europe at the time.) The young animal was purchased by Sándor Rozsnyai for the purpose of attracting patrons to his legendary Arizona nightclub on Nagymező Street.

According to contemporary accounts, Aida may have been around two years old at the time, and yet she was so small that she only reached the waists of her human partners. Despite this, she had great talent for moving and "dancing" on the stage, and later she was even taught how to perform a unique head-counting production. What made her a particularly special attraction was her "shaving elephant" act, a comic number in which she wiped shaving cream off an audience member with a wooden "razor" before washing them clean with a bucketful of water she blasted at them from her trunk. She did all of this with great pleasure, and I can tell you she loved to show off this trick her whole life!

The public loved the talented little elephant and, as a special expression of their appreciation, she was constantly fed sugar. According to the story, Aida was so used to getting sweets that it started

to affect her work: she would only be willing to perform after she was given such treats. Another interesting thing about Aida is that she lived in the zoo in the City Park and literally commuted to work from there with her then-trainer, Sándor Huszár. The two of them would walk down Andrassy Avenue all the way to the Opera, and then to the Arizona's rear artists' entrance. As time passed, the little elephant grew much larger and her huge body outgrew the human-sized entrance to the nightclub. When she simply didn't fit through the door any longer, her career changed. This is when Aida moved on to live and work at Dezső Antalek's private circus. "Aida the elephant can do anything!" read the placards. "She can write, read, count, play music and dance." And Aida really was a very talented and docile elephant! Even the film world discovered her and gave her a role in Kálmán Latabár's film *Keep Your Chin Up*. I know from contemporary accounts that he initially had problems with the filming because Aida had the soul of a lamb in her huge body, making her afraid of spotlights and cameras. I have heard that a special friendship developed between the actor and the elephant, because whenever Aida heard Latabar's voice, she immediately went over to him. Of course, this was not by coincidence! The actor was favouring her with four to five kilos of sugar a day.

In the '50s and '60s, Aida was a huge star, travelling halfway across the world, even as far away as Tokyo. A 1954 article I read said that the audience in Sofia loved her so much that her appearance there, originally scheduled to last for two weeks, had to be extended by months. The requests were received one after the other by telegram for "the visitors from Budapest to please let Aida stay with the children of Sofia a bit longer." Newspaper journalists were also fond of the huge animal. They wrote fictional stories about her, and she was the subject of nearly 50 articles and photographic features. These bore titles such as "The Elephant Queen of the

Circus”, “A Production That Never Gets Old” and “The Highlight of the Evening is the Shaving Elephant”. I also read several old newspaper articles that revealed that, despite the difficulties of the post-war years, when people were struggling with serious challenges themselves, they still took care of Aida with extraordinary attentiveness and dedication. They measured her weight every month and looked after her stomach: in addition to 50 kilos of hay a day, she received an allotment of thirty kilos of oats, four kilos of beets and two kilos of bran, all served strictly in two daily instalments. In fact, they even made sure to dilute her raspberry syrup with plain water, because soda water bothered her, tickling her trunk. As Aida sometimes suffered from joint problems and aching legs, she was bathed in medicinal waters from the Széchenyi Baths across the street every day, in the zoo’s hippo pool.

The nationalisations of 1951 did not spare us circuses either: the state took everything away from the private companies. The National Circus Company was established, and new travelling circuses were assembled from the confiscated equipment. I am now reminded of a relevant story about a tractor called the “Grasshopper”, which is a good example of how things worked in this era: the Eötvös Circus had a motorcycle-like vehicle with chain track treads from which the four-cylinder Opel engine had been removed for use in a tractor whose engine was out of order. Of course, no one cared if the engine would fit in the other vehicle. And this tractor became famous, because it was not possible to change gears after the motor was changed, so it always jumped when starting. That’s why it was called the “Grasshopper”. This is a bit like how the circuses were put together, and how the Alföldi (Great Plain) Circus, the Dunántúli (Transdanubian) Circus, the Tiszántúli (Trans-Tisza) Circus and the Vidám (Happy) Circus, among others, came into being. These circuses provided a livelihood for the dispossessed

circus artists formerly working with private circuses. Contracting with them were Hungarian artists who – if they were lucky – still had a caravan left after nationalisation, but only so that they would have a place to sleep.

The elephant was a huge asset, worth a fortune at the time. Aida was also taken from her previous owner, and MACIVA entrusted her to animal trainer Gábor Szegedi to work with her next. Szegedi knew how to work with a wide variety of animals, including lions and horses, and even taught hippos. This experienced trainer must have done something to annoy Aida somehow. It never came to light what might have happened, but in any case, the elephant “turned” on Szegedi for some reason, inside the ring. This is an important signal that the trainer must understand. When the elephant turns its head resolutely toward its master, it wants to say, “Right now I’m just turning to face you, but tomorrow maybe I’ll squash you!” After this incident, Aida never obeyed Szegedi again. That’s when my father came into the picture. As I mentioned earlier, he had all that experience with animals because he started out as an animal keeper and later worked as a trainer, alongside doing his strong man stunts. Interestingly, Aida immediately accepted my father and never turned against him. From then on, the two of them worked together, so my father had an elephant number next to his Hercules act.

Aida became part of our daily lives and a member of our family. After the day’s performance, my mother made us dinner, but my father never ate until he had gone to the stable to take care of the animal. He gave her hay and then he made a bed for our huge family member: in the case of Aida, this meant putting two or three bales of straw on the floorboards underneath her. This is how it went every blessed day. Only after doing all this and ascertaining that the elephant was fine could my father sit down for a leisurely dinner. But all Aida had to do was trumpet once, and my old man

would leap right up from the table and run to see what was going on in the stable. Like all circus kids, I too was there at my dad's side, watching what he was doing and how he was doing it. Because of this, Aida and I got to know each other very well; it was no problem for me to go to her and help her. While the civilian kids watched the huge animal in amazement, it was perfectly natural for me to give her leg a big hug.

I remember how much I loved bathing the elephant! If there was a hydrant near wherever the circus was stationed, my father would ask permission from the local fire department to use it to bathe Aida. What an experience that was for me as a kid! First you had to get her skin soaking wet, then you could get to work. Her head and neck were always very dirty, because her skin was wrinkled in this area, and also because she was always tossing hay, straw, sawdust, as well as mud and sand, in this direction with her trunk. Since I was the little one, I was sent to climb up on her and use a scrubbing brush to thoroughly clean these sensitive parts. Aida loved it; it was enormously pleasurable for her, and of course for me too! It was an incredible sight to see the positions she would adopt. Although she was a huge adult animal, she behaved like she didn't weigh more than a ton. She would stand on her head in joy, then sit down or lie down while spreading out all four legs, in ecstasy over the bath. We always had a good laugh over this! Aida was a particularly sensitive and attentive elephant. Another story comes to mind about this: My brother Zsolti must have been around two years old when he went into the stable alone once. We didn't even notice, we just heard the elephant trumpeting. My father ran over immediately to see why she was signalling to us. Arriving at the barn, he saw what was wrong: Aida was alerting us to come because my brother was climbing under her forelegs. She trumpeted because she could smell the toddler, but she couldn't see him and

didn't want to hurt him. Well, that's what a very smart animal she was! Of course, she also had her weaker points, because she was fearful and frightened easily. For example, when we were walking down the street with her and the wind happened to pick up a paper bag, she would indicate with loud trumpeting that this was not to her liking. She really didn't like it when something rattled behind her, where she couldn't see. Aida didn't like dogs either. I saw with my own eyes how they disturbed her! We often tied her to a tree with a loose rope so she could be in the fresh air and graze as she pleased. When she noticed a dog approaching her, she started kicking the ground with her front feet to loosen the grass, then picked up a good supply of clumps of earth and waited. When the dog was close enough – in “firing range”, so to speak – she cocked her trunk back between her forelegs in order to maximise momentum, aimed and then – wham! She generally hit her target dead on. These were entertaining scenes; I always got a good laugh out of them!

Aida and I had many adventures together over the years, and I can say that I knew her well. I knew that she could also be mischievous sometimes as well. At the circus, we use a “U”-shaped shackle that closes with a large screw to tie up elephants. This clamp does not hurt the animal at all, and it is connected to a chain. Usually that's how Aida was secured overnight.

Once, we heard a big cracking sound, and my dad rushed out to see what was happening this time. Aida had somehow freed herself of her shackle and was now busy knocking down the tent poles. My father gave me a good scolding. He blamed me for the situation, thinking I had failed to attach the big screw on the shackle on the elephant's ankle properly. I knew perfectly well that I was innocent this time, so I tried to figure out how she might have managed to escape. It turned out that she had spent hours tapping the locking screw of the shackle with her trunk, which loosened it enough until

it fell right out. It was then that she set off and, wherever she could, caused a bit of devastation. If she came across a bucket, a broom, or a spade, you can bet she broke it to pieces. What was a bigger problem was when she secretly got into her food supply, because she was able to eat an entire 30-kilogramme sack of carrots! Afterwards, of course, she had such a bad case of diarrhoea that we couldn't even clean it up. And well, I probably don't have to say any more, since everyone can imagine how tricky it is to perform with an elephant with diarrhoea.

In any case, Aida was a very friendly animal, she never hurt people. Or to be more precise: she only struck when she encountered some kind of injustice. One such incident occurred in Bulgaria in 1959. My dad had put together a water cart for her so that she would always have enough to drink. This cart was always parked in the stable tent, full of fresh, cold water. Some of the circus artists were in the habit of using the animal's water to chill melons. On a very hot summer day, one of the young acrobats, Ilija, brought his melon to cool in the elephant's water cart. Well, the thing was that Aida also really liked watermelon, and no sooner did she notice that there was one in the lad's hands than she reached for it with her trunk. Of course, Ilija didn't give it to her. Instead he played around with her a bit, which our pachyderm friend found insulting. The incident happened when Ilija came back for the melon after a while and, unfortunately for him, had to pass in front of the elephant. Aida just reached out with her trunk and gave the boy a huge slap for the previous injury. It was her revenge for the melon because elephants never forget!

Aida also didn't like it when people had fun at her expense either, especially if she didn't know the person who was doing it. She always slapped people who did that. She didn't hurt or harm anyone, it was just a signal from her. It wasn't that dangerous; the worst

thing that might happen is she would send them flying. It is much more dangerous when, instead of slapping you, the elephant pulls you towards it. That's a real problem, because it means the animal is so furious it could even kill a human.

Aida never did anything like that.

The two of us had an excellent relationship. In fact, I had the feeling that Aida considered me her friend. What makes me think this? I'll give you an example. When we were on tour in Bulgaria and travelling from one place to another, after the performances I had to walk her out to the station to board the animal train. It was late at night, terribly dark outside, and the area was full of stray dogs, and we were often attacked by these ownerless, wild canines along the way. I can still vividly remember how Aida and I fought them off together. We would kick at them together and hit them. Usually we won, but sometimes we had no choice but to escape. In such cases, Aida always waited for me to grab the chain hanging around her neck, and only then did she start running. That's when I felt she was taking care of me. I loved her very much, and I think she knew and felt that she could count on me. Maybe that's why she behaved so well when we performed together.

The first time we worked together on the stage was in the summer of 1952, with the Dunántúli Circus. It was a custom in the political system of the time for everyone to offer something on the 20th of August, as a kind of volunteer work in honour of Hungary's national holiday. My father had a great idea: "Let's have Pityu lead the elephant." What a big deal this was for me as a kid! My costume consisted of baggy wide trousers, a waistcoat and a turban. "Little Boy with the Big Elephant" was our production for a month. Okay, it wasn't that big a number, because all I had to do was lead Aida by her trunk as we walked around the stage together. Our closing trick was for me to grab one of her ears, whereupon

she lifted me up with her front leg as I swung myself up to her neck. Then I climbed up from her neck to her head, where I stood up, to the great acclaim of the crowd.

Circus animals are incredibly smart, by the way. They know exactly when there is a performance, and also that they can take more liberties on the stage because, in front of the audience, the trainer is not so strict with them. Of course, at a practice session after such a “naughty” performance, the recalcitrant beast will do everything flawlessly so as to avoid a conflict with the “biped boss”. In a sense, Aida is also associated with the greatest act of disobedience that I ever allowed myself to commit against my father in my life. I was studying at the circus school, and alongside my training, I was also working as the assistant elephant keeper. When I had to, I also travelled with my father. I remember, for example, the 1956 Hungarian tour in Czechoslovakia, where I scrubbed Aida from April until October. This was a good little job for me, because it meant that, as a student, I was already earning money in addition to going to school. The plan was for me to become an assistant trainer over time so that I could learn everything and later take over the elephant number from my father. Yes, except this wasn’t my plan. At the time, we were renting a plot of land on Amerikai Road, where we lived in our caravan. One night my father came home in a good mood, happy with the belief that he had got his son squared away. He thought that if I took the number from him, I would have a secure job for as long as Aida was alive.

“No, I want to be an aerial acrobat! I said. Of course, this blew up into a huge row. “Well then, son, get out!” my father retorted. “I’ve been supporting you so far, but now you are 16 years old. If you don’t do what I ask you to do, then go ahead and support yourself!”

“Fine!” I replied confidently, because I already knew exactly what I wanted to do in the circus.

One of my last memories of Aida is from Athens. Our circus was stationed not far from the Acropolis, and the next stop was Cyprus, where we were travelling by ship. So somehow the elephant had to be transported to the port of Piraeus, where the vessel was waiting. It was quite a distance, about 25 kilometres, and of course I was the one who had to find a way to perform this task. I can say that this was a truly memorable walk. Aida and I struggled through the kilometres. I walked beside her for a while, and then when I got tired, I sat on her back. Our progress was slow, very slow, because Aida had to stop at every tuft of grass and tree for a snack. “Please, let’s move on!” I moaned, then grabbed her trunk and drove on. Because of her huge mass, she was prone to fatigue in general, but this journey particularly wore her out. She didn’t much want to move by the end, she was so exhausted. I remember the boarding. My God, how frightened she was! They placed a harness under her belly and lifted her up with a crane. The poor thing just trumpeted and trumpeted with all her might, because she had no inkling of what was happening to her.

Years later, I worked with Aida again. This is another eternal memory for me, as it was also my first joint production with my wife, Ili. At the request of the director László Feldmann, we performed a so-called “pas de deux” lifting number atop the elephant, who had bulked up to four tonnes by then. The elephant was part of our family for a long time, and my father worked with her for years, only passing her on around 1971. And I set out on my own path.

I only know a little about Aida’s later fate from the news. After my dad finished working with her, she continued working for a little while with a new trainer. However, in 1973, her joint disease re-occurred, so she was brought home prematurely from her Yerevan tour in a separate railway carriage, accompanied by specialists. Shortly afterwards, a final decision was made by a council of ten

specialists and doctors: although she was hardly 40 years old, Aida was sent to rest in retirement. The plan was for her to live out her final years in the Kittenberger Game Park in Veszprém. The locals were awaiting the world-famous circus elephant so eagerly that they volunteered to collectively build her stable in record speed! According to a 1974 article in the Veszprém Journal, they even converted a concrete lorry so that they could ship her safely. However, Aida never reached Veszprém.

She died suddenly before setting out for her new home.

I always wanted to be an aerial acrobat, because for me there is nothing more beautiful at the circus. In my eyes, the aerialist was also the king of the circus, looking down at the audience from above. For me, the air is love.

Heights were no problem, because I never was the timorous type, and as I was a young fellow with a strong physique, I planned from the beginning to become a catcher one day. So perhaps it is understandable why my father's wish for me to become an animal trainer was completely hopeless. My sister and I were attending the circus school, and after I got into a row with my dad over opposing his wishes, I had no choice, I had to do a joint number together with Panni. We started practising in the air, rehearsing in our courtyard. Our ally and supporter was our mother, who, as a former aerialist herself, provided us with very useful and important professional advice. She stood up for us when we needed her to and asked our father for help when we needed it. When we told Mum we needed a mouthpiece to do a "tooth hang", all she said was, "I'll talk to your father." I don't know, in the end, how she convinced my old man (and he might not even have needed too much convincing), but my father helped me anyway.

Since back then it wasn't like, if I needed some piece of equipment, then I could just order it online or buy it at the store, and there wasn't even a dental technician who could help, so my dad made everything with his own hands. For the mouthpiece, for example, he used the cord of a kerosene lamp, because it was made

out of material that was thick, soft, and strong. These we had to bite on, and then he sewed up this imprinted pattern and stuffed it with cotton wool. It was harder than leather, though it was also more durable, and it could be sewn up quite sparsely using strong homemade thread. I have kept this mouthpiece to this day.

So our mother joined us for our home practice sessions and watched our movements. She made sure that we tied the rope to the tree securely, made a tight loop and hooked the mouthpiece to it properly. We then took the mouthpieces into our mouths and hung from them while holding up our legs above the ground. Mum measured the time and encouraged us to stay up there, to endure it for longer and longer. Although we had role models to emulate, older artists who did an aerial number similar to what my sister and I wanted to do, we were still in the planning phase. Truth be told, Panni and I didn't have a more precise idea yet. All we knew was that we wanted to be acrobats. But at that time, we were still very far from being able to work in a circus.

Although I was strong, I had to practice a lot to become a decent catcher, because the right muscles for this develop and strengthen properly from working in the cradle, a suspended frame from which the catcher hangs from his knees and grabs incoming flyers before tossing them back. And it was just as important for me to learn the technique. I had to pay attention to momentum, for example, because if I didn't get it right, I wouldn't be able to throw my partner to the correct height. We were not headed in a particular direction: I had to learn everything. I was also lucky because it always turned out that I was able to learn from fine mentors. One of my great teachers was Mr Reno. The Richter Circus had signed an Italian family called the Renos. They were very good floor acrobats. Mr Reno worked with his son Misi and daughter Stella quite a lot. Since my dad had a good relationship with them, he asked Mr

Reno to give me a bit of coaching when he had time. He taught me how to do a handstand and a "flick-flack" handspring.

Stella later went on to marry József Richter Sr, and Mr Reno returned to Sicily with Misi. Life is interesting. Years later, we met Misi again, and I can say that the reunion was a very special one. In 1964, the Hunor group got a contract to work in Italy. (*I will write more about the Hunor group later.*) We were appearing in the beautiful Circo Orfei in Siracusa, which at that time was one of the loveliest circuses in Europe, with their performances consistently selling out. The Hunor group was the first number after the break, because we needed time to set up our equipment and put up the net. I happened to be standing by the mast when someone addressed me: "Are you really Hungarians?" "Yes, Misi. We are Hungarians," I answered him. Because I recognised him immediately, although he no longer recognised me, as we had both been children the last time we met. To this day, it is still with great fondness that I remember Mr Reno, who was my first trainer. Thanks to him, when I was admitted into the acrobat school, I already knew a lot.

Panni and I were very serious about our preparations for our joint number, practising every day, and not just a little bit, either! However, aerialists, unlike, for example, jugglers, unfortunately grow tired relatively quickly. Acrobats make much more use of their bodies than anyone else in the profession, limiting their possible practice time. A juggler can practise for as long as five or six hours at a time, but the level of physical exertion required from aerialists and other acrobats means that they cannot stand the same amount of effort.

Later, in the rehearsal room (now the MACIVA Artists' Colony), my sister and I practised by rehearsing for, say, an hour and twenty minutes, and then taking an hour to rest. Resting in many cases didn't mean we sat around and put our feet up, but instead played around with the other acrobats, those who were training at the circus school

at the same time we were. What constituted our playing around was trying out each other's tricks. It is important to mention that we were not unattended during our independent exercises. Although he didn't have to look after us much, there was always a so-called "practice supervisor" sitting in the room. This was a very good idea on MACI-VA's part at the time, as it gave job opportunities to older acrobats who would otherwise just be sitting at home. So at least they could feel useful in the rehearsal room. We, the young people, owed them a lot and received useful and important professional advice from them. Looking back on all this, this was a very positive phase of our younger years, because we developed tremendously.

After resisting my dad's fury, I set off and, burning with a desire to prove myself, approached my mother's brother, my Uncle Józsi Richter, who had his own circus, the Sport Circus. This circus also has an interesting history: after the former Richter Circus was nationalised, the brothers came together and refused to give up; they practically started again from the ground up. Having no tent, they performed in cultural centres. In the meantime, they were saving until they had enough money to buy a tarpaulin that they sewed into what they called "the arena", which was just the wallings of the tent and the posts holding it up, while the top of the tent was still missing. However, as it formed an enclosure, viewers had to pay to come in and watch the show. Later, when they had saved some more money, they could finally buy a top and then had a complete tent. This is what eventually became the Sport Circus.

So I visited my uncle: "My sister and I are doing an aerial number," I told him, "Uncle Józsi, would you give us a job? Would you contract us?" The old man was fond of us. Sure, Pityu, come on over!" he replied. This is how we started working with our duo aerial number in mid-March 1958 at the Sport Circus. And for regular wages too! I think in my early career as a novice acrobat, the luckiest break in

my life came in 1959. My father was so reconciled and supported us. In addition to designing and making the props for our cradle "handvoltige", the cradle in which I sat, he also arranged a foreign contract for us. When he went to Bulgaria with the elephant number and as a strong man, he told the director that his children also had an aerial number. Thanks to my father, Panni and I got a contract too, so we all went to Bulgaria together. I no longer remember how much they paid us, but I do know that I got a lot more out of this tour professionally than can be measured financially. This is because there was a group of young people there who were being taught by Nikolai Panov. This is the Nikolai Panov who in Spain did an eight form on high bars over several lions, without a net, and whose name is written in gold at the Russian circus museum. So he was the boss of the group of eleven, living and working with the young acrobats. Since they were the starting number, they rehearsed both in the morning and after the performances. They had two cradles and two horizontal bars lower down: and their ten-man team consisted of three catchers and eight obermanns, or flyers, which in terms of practice meant that each of them would have had to rehearse for half an hour. Except the catchers would get tired, which shortens the possible total practice time.

I sat there after each performance and watched them, watching what they were doing. I had a professional interest, because I was doing a cradle act too! On one such occasion, Panov noticed me. "You're just sitting here doing nothing," he said. "Get up there and relieve one of those catchers! You don't have to catch the trick – just put your hand out so that the flyer can see where he should grab for." Panov was trying to spare his catchers, as I could see that one of them was already completely exhausted, and another one's foot was swollen. "Fine," I said and popped up from my spot to climb up to the cradle! I started practising with them. Just as the

master asked me, I put my hand out. And then after a few tries like this, the flyer grabbed it. Well, that's all I needed! After that, I went right ahead and took his hand too! Old Panov liked this, because he saw that I was always there with them, rehearsing and suffering with them. You can bet I was suffering, because the exercise hurt a lot, many times. My hands bled, my legs bled, but I didn't care, it didn't matter, because I wanted to prove it! Yes, to prove to myself and my father that I could survive on my own. While I do use the word "suffering" now, at the time, it didn't feel like torment at all. It's an interesting thing – and it's perhaps the most beautiful thing of all in it – that despite the injuries, I was happy to try, because I knew perfectly well that if I wanted to do a trick, I had to work extremely hard for it!

And this perseverance of mine brought results. "Okay, then this morning you come practise with us," Panov said one day, "and bring Panni with you too!" We helped them with their exercises, and in return, Master Panov always gave us half an hour of his time to help us develop. And that was not just some everyday coaching we got! It was fantastic! He put the best flyers in my hands, while Panni got to practise with his best catcher. We learned tricks that we'd never done up in the air before. Since we hadn't even heard that they might exist.

My progress was spectacular, and I became the kind of catcher who, if anyone climbed up the ladder to me, I would send him or her off in a somersault. Later, I went on to be considered one of the best catchers in the world, and for this I give credit to Panov, because he gave us a very thorough schooling. I learned from him that there are "catchers" and there are "catchers". He also spent weeks showing me how to throw a somersault. "When you do the throw, put your belly into it too," he said. I tried and I tried to this day, until one day I finally succeeded: the somersault I threw

went half a metre higher up! "Well, finally!" the master acknowledged. This work lasted for three months, and we trained hard. "Three-tempo forward somersault, come on, do it! Then let's have a one-and-a-half somersault!" Panov would instruct my sister. "All right, you've warmed up now, so you can do the double!" In Hungary at that time, a back-handed single somersault was the greatest possible feat achievable, and anyone who could do it was considered a top aerial acrobat. And my sister did a double somersault. So it's no mystery why, after my sister and I returned home, we found work immediately: our wishes had come true!

On 1 May 1960, we were rewarded with the opportunity to perform at the Capital Circus.

I WANTED TO BE THE BEST

It is a very comforting feeling when one is confident in oneself, and that is what I was. But that feeling was not given to me for free. I had to work hard for it.

When I was a young lad, I wanted to be the best in the world. This may sound foolish, but as a child, that's what you think. Later, as I grew older, I grew content with the idea of simply being "one of the best". This determination has accompanied me all my life so far, because deep down, I have always longed for more than just to make a living from the productions I have presented. It was very important to me for what I was doing to be valuable. I was always the one who drove the Hunor group, too: "Let's practise, practise, practise!" Of course, this mentality was less understandable at a time when everyone received the same daily wages regardless of the amount of effort they put into their work. Most of the acrobats thought, "What I'm doing right now is already plenty" or "Why practise and torture myself, let alone do tricks where I might fall?" (It's true that there was a net under them, but the fall could still hurt.)

I thought differently. "If I do something, it should be done well!" This is the principle I worked from. Sports would be a good analogy here: you can still compete by only doing something a little bit well. However, if you want to be an Olympic champion, you have to suffer for it, and you always have to strive for more. It is the same in the world of the circus. You can dream of a world-class production, but this is never given as a gift! The only way to achieve results is through hard and persistent work. In acrobatics, the way it works is, if I want to learn to do a difficult trick, say, doing a hand-

stand from the teeterboard, then it needs to be well grounded, and the trick has to be built up gradually. You succeed once, and the next time you don't, but gradually it starts to come together, and the exercise will be properly executed more and more often. Over time, in the practice sessions, we get to a point where eight out of ten attempts are perfect and only two are failures. Once we have achieved this, we try it without the lunge belt and safety line and later incorporate it into the number. This expands the production with newer and more difficult and professionally valuable elements. As an old acrobat saying goes: "Let the first try succeed!", because this is the one the spectator sees live at the performance.

Of course, the practising doesn't stop even if you are continuously performing in the ring, because it is a permanent, never-ending job. The compulsion to develop is also continuous in our profession, as it is on this basis that invitations are sent.

The circus world knows me for being a good catcher. What makes someone good at this? One thing, for example, is correcting for an error made by the flyer by sensing, even at the moment of departure, that the flight will be too long or too short. Many catchers are adequate as long as there is no problem, and the flyer rotates perfectly. However, for a good catcher, it is also not a problem if the trick is less well executed, because he can correct it. He does all this, of course, in such a way that the audience doesn't notice anything, since the whole thing comes out fine in the end. We catchers are very important!

The abrasions under my knees would bleed and hurt, but I never said "enough of this". I struggled to prove that I could be one of the best in the world! All that mattered was that the trick I was catching was going to work, that it had to be done in the performance. And if a trick failed, it was never due to my lack of my motivation.

Did I have bad days? You bet I did! But bad days and acrobatic work are two completely separate things. We're circus people, and it doesn't matter how I feel, because the viewer has expectations, and of course so does the director who signed us.

I've also experienced things like having a hard time getting out in front of the audience because, say, in the pre-performance rehearsal, the polar bear had just ripped a trainer to shreds, and I was one of the people who had to help clean up the bloody sawdust from the ring. Such accidents are not very common, but they do happen. This is when the circus comes together: we tidy up, and the show goes on. For me, as an acrobat, I have to go out into the ring as if nothing has happened. No, this isn't insensitivity at all, because we have emotions, but when we are working, we have to put our anxieties aside and do our jobs. And out there, in the ring, we really do put everything aside, because the only things that matter are the production and the audience!

You can't do anything halfway in the circus because then no one will care about it. There are no half somersaults on the stage! Plus, as a catcher, my responsibility is greater. Because if a "flying" acrobat makes a mistake, down he falls. On the other hand, the catcher, whose job it is to "catch, throw and catch again", can't afford to relax for an instant, because he is responsible for the other acrobat's safety. And the awareness of this responsibility was there inside me throughout my career as an acrobat.

I never, for one moment, forgot it!

Even when I was still a student at the circus school, I already knew that I would like to work in an acrobatic group one day. There was a movie called "Trapeze", starring Tony Curtis, Gina Lollobrigida, and Burt Lancaster. I watched it at the cinema many times, together with Gabi Hunfi and Karcsi Deltai. We all knew every line by heart. As students at the circus school, we dreamt that one day we would be successful too. We took our practice and training so seriously that we even broke the rules about extra practice time: we left the window of the school locker room open so we could climb back at night to practise in secret. To our dismay, the caretaker found us out. After noticing the light, he inquired what we were doing, and then he reported us. The next day, our teacher, Ödön Szakács – the grandfather of Ildikó Szakács – told the director. But we loved Ödön and knew he had no choice in the matter; he had to report us. "If you do that again, you'll be expelled!" the director, Imre Baross, told us in a firm voice. Of course, our parents were also summoned to the school.

I know now that this secret training was very foolish. To practise on a trapeze without supervision was a great boldness, because if we accidentally got "tangled up" or collided, we could have been seriously injured. But who was thinking about that at the time? We were young and very determined. Needless to say, even after this incident, our enthusiasm never diminished. We continued planning what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. We even had a name picked out: we decided that we were going to be the

“Hungary Boys” and we were going to work in Las Vegas, and then later at the d’Hiver circus in Paris, where we’d be the main attraction! Karsci Deltai and I sat down together to dream of our future over the big pot of tea and bread and dripping his mum made us.

We were not the ones who founded the Hunor group, and it did not get its name when we became aerialists. The group existed even before then, as “ground horizontal bar act” acrobats working on the floor: Karsci Deltai, Gabi Hunfi, Imi László and Éva Páviács. We knew each other well, as two of them were my friends, and we made our Capital Circus debuts together with them in 1960. They graduated from the circus school with the partner horizontal bar act, and Panni and I came from the Sport Circus with the duo aerialist number. The school did not support our shared dream, so Karsci, Gabi, my sister and I practised in secrecy. In the winter of 1962, our joint production was born: an aerial high bar act. We were helped by the then director of the Capital Circus, Nándor Barton, who was very knowledgeable about aerial numbers, as he had previously been an aerialist himself and also ran an aerialist team, the Barton group, in which his wife was the catcher. Barton also arranged to have our props made. They were not perfect but were just good enough for us to start our work with. (We used these in our first contract in 1963, which later became a longer tour lasting for months.) The central element of the equipment was an integrated three-dimensional frame two and a half metres wide and eight metres long, with the swing lower down beneath it. Our problem with it was that the frame was too stiff and very hard. This caused me, as the catcher, the most difficulty of all. You have to imagine how I was putting my legs between two poles: I was hanging by my knees from one of the 4.5-millimetre-thick steel tubes, while using the other to brace my feet, and I was the only element in the number that gave some stretch to slow down the dynamics.

We had to change this, because the inflexible rigid steel tube had bent under my feet several times, so great was the force when I caught the rotating acrobats. As a result, I overstrained my knees pretty quickly. Too quickly, unfortunately... Later there was a significant change in the props: the boys switched from the former delicate horizontal bar, constructed from thick paper, to a steel horizontal bar that could also be used in artistic gymnastics. Instead of an integrated rigid frame, the two horizontal bars and the cradle were now fitted separately. The flyers initially had difficulty with this transition, as it was not possible to completely tighten the horizontal bars, and they always moved a bit. For me, however, as a catcher, this solution was much better because when a trick had a flyer come at me in a way that jerked me when I caught him, then the cradle could move as well, and thanks to its flexibility, I was spared as well.

This is how an acceptable apparatus eventually emerged. Later on – thanks to another idea – we improved this one too, and we also made a swing for it... but I’ll come back to that later. Our Hunor aerialist team had the great advantage of – even though we had high bars and later a swing up there – of fitting into an average-sized tent circus. Unlike, for example, the big aerial numbers from North Korea or Russia, which are beautiful but no longer fit into venues like the Capital Circus. We didn’t even have any problems with contracts: we were working continuously!

There were several changes in the Hunor group over the years, with Éva Páviács leaving in 1961, and Imi László following in 1963. Imi’s story is very interesting because it is a good example of how anything truly can happen at the circus. He left because he was starting to feel fear. In any case, we didn’t know anything about this, because he didn’t say anything. I just noticed that his palms were sweating at performances. And this is a very big problem in

our profession, because a flyer arriving with a wet palm cannot be caught safely. In fact, for an aerial number, it's downright dangerous! One day, he suddenly released his grip and fell straight into the net from the horizontal bar. The next day he packed up and headed home without informing us. His work with us was over. So then we were a foursome: Gabi Hunfi, Karcsi Deltai, Panni and myself. Then in 1969, the team expanded again, with Pista Szilágyi and his wife, Sári Deltai, both joining to make us six again. After that, there was only one change in our numbers, which occurred in 1970, when Gabi Hunfi failed to arrive for our tour of Austria. He decided to choose his wife over the group and secretly defected to Italy. The only problem was that he forgot to tell us about it. Maybe he was afraid someone would give him away, I don't know. I can pretty much understand, because life sometimes forced one to do such things, it's just that his method could have been different. This is how we ended up with our final line-up, with "The Five Hunors" consisting of Pisti Szilágyi, Sári Deltai, Karcsi Deltai, my sister Panni and myself.

It's not easy working together with a team. It would not be truthful to say that there was no tension within the Hunor group, but there were no serious quarrels either. If something wasn't going right, we kept struggling with it and practised, because it was in everyone's interest for us to remain successful. In the Hunor group, we were childhood friends and, in some cases, family. So in short, we knew each other well. Was there a leader? Everyone in the Hunor group was equally important, yet life somehow dictated that I would be the "unspoken" leader. This was important when it came to negotiating contracts with agents and directors. Maybe it was because I had slightly better communication skills and learned to speak foreign languages earlier than the others.

I was married in 1963, but my wife never became a member of the

Hunor group. Ili and I did a separate production called the "Duo Kristof" with a perch (a long pole that has to be kept in balance from below while tricks are performed by another acrobat up top) number in 1964 and a duo teeterboard number in 1966, and from then on, we travelled with three productions. We worked constantly and had contracts lined up well in advance. However, not everything always went smoothly. We were working on a contract in Turin in 1968 – the Hunor group and the Two Kristófs when I felt a twinge in my lower back. Unfortunately, it wasn't just a simple twinge, because I ended up in hospital, where it turned out to be a bigger problem than we had thought: a spinal rupture. They plastered it up. This procedure was not very pleasant: I was laid out on a special table that only supported my neck and hips, and there was a plate in the middle part. Then they began to wrap the plaster around me, all along my spine. When I was fully wrapped up, they stood me up and pulled out the plate. This "armour" didn't last long on me because, unfortunately, they hadn't applied the plaster properly, and it shattered around me. So they plastered me again, on a "just to be on the safe side" basis, and wrapped me up good. They got it on me so tight that I could hardly breathe, even when at rest, and I was only able to sleep on all fours. The circus travelled on from Turin, and by the time we arrived in Bologna, I had had enough of the cast; I grabbed a big knife and cut it off myself. The circus director asked what had happened, where was the cast? "I took it off because I'm fine now. Nothing hurts!" I replied. Luckily the doctors were wrong: it turned out there was no crack in my spine, only a pinched nerve. However, as the years went by, this became an increasingly common occurrence.

There were other changes in 1968 too, because my wife was pregnant, so we spent more time at home. During this time, we continued developing the props, adding the swing I mentioned earlier.

This addition was unique in the world. How did it occur to us? Actually, it was Karcsi Deltai who wanted to do a swing number, because he had really developed an appreciation for this genre when we were working in Italy alongside a Czech swing number, the Fercos family. Except the classic Russian swing is a ground act, and I still wanted to work up in the air as an aerialist. Then along came the clever and creative “jack-of-all-trades” Pista Szilágyi with his great idea: what if we raised the swing high up? Pista wasn’t idle. He worked out a design for the entire set and crafted a tiny model of it so that we could imagine what it would look like in reality: “Horizontal bar, horizontal bar, here’s the cradle with the catcher and then we’d have a swing behind the rear bridge, from which you can fly over the horizontal bar into the cradle.” Right, sure, but the swings that are on the floor always go very high in the air and also send the acrobat to the same height; this is no good for us. To address this problem, Pista very cleverly figured out that if we suspended the swing from two pairs of cables and shortened the first pair, then the contraption, as its platform reached the height of the first bar, would push forward, not just upwards. And it worked perfectly! This eventually became the Hunor number I was most proud of, because this swinging prop made us unique. No one in the world had ever done a number like this in the air! Others came much later, but we were the first! Us! The Hunor group!

We worked on this number at home while Ili was pregnant. Unfortunately, there was no Capital Circus during this period, because the old building had been demolished, so, in the absence of a better option, we practised in the garden of my father’s Columbus Street house, on an apparatus we built standing on legs of piping. Unfortunately, the net could not be placed high enough, it was stretched about a metre above the ground. So the flyers still needed to be secured by a lunge belt to fall into the net safely.

Under these circumstances, we practised the tricks we wanted to do from the swing. Pista Szilágyi became the clown, the “comedy element”. His wife, Sari Deltai, was very talented. She was able to complete a double forward somersault over the horizontal bar, which was a huge thing at the time!

At the first practice session, my brother, Zsolt, served as the “guinea pig”. With a safety rope attached to his waist, he was the first to jump off the swing. However, his leap was not executed quite correctly, because one of the cords of the lunge belt suddenly got caught in one of the handles of the swing, which caused him to jerk to the side and hit the first horizontal bar with his head. Luckily, he suffered no major harm, but it turned out later that the episode had still left a deep imprint on him. When he finished school in 1971, I wanted to include him in the aerial number, so I invited him to come with us to Copenhagen. “Sorry, but I’m afraid to be up there,” he replied. He later became a bear trainer and worked with my father for a long time. Later on, he left the circus world behind and became a successful entrepreneur. I am very proud of him! Returning to my father’s yard, because our practice sessions were held outdoors, we were exposed to the weather, but there we were still able to experiment with the possibilities offered by the new equipment and measure the new dimensions as well as the distances. Later on, we continued practising in a tent MACIVA had set up in the City Park. It was during this period that my son, Kristian, was born, so he was there with us too; Ili pushed him to our rehearsals in a pram.

Memories about the programme? There are many. One that stands out is from 1966/67, when we performed at the Stadthalle in Vienna for the Christmas show. The venue itself was extraordinary because the performance took place in two areas: there was a separate stage and a circus ring. Suspended twelve metres above the

ring were the flying trapezes. We were performing in the other area, above the stage. This is not easy to install in an indoor stadium, because our fixed rope system was adapted for a circus, and the dimensions of circuses are all roughly the same: there they have four main masts holding up the tent, and we connect everything to those, or in a permanent circus building, there is a place for everything under the dome. Here, in this huge sports hall, all these elements were missing. I remember when we were installing everything, we looked down and saw that the top row of lamps was half a metre below us, meaning our high horizontal bar equipment must have been about sixteen metres from the floor! Even the artistic director of the Stadthalle was amazed. “You’re going to do your production all the way up there?” he asked. “So high?” “That’s right!” I replied, and saw that he was also surprised by the unusual height we would be working at. He nodded and with admiration in his voice said, “Well then, gentlemen, hats off to you!”

The next day we continued the installation and, as usual, saved putting up the net till last. To tell the truth, we were calm about everything because we thought we would be able to attach the netting to the seating system without any problems. We planned – as this was the obvious solution – to raise the net to the height of the apparatus. Except it turned out that the seats we intended to use were not fixed to the floor and therefore could not be used for attaching the net. Since we couldn’t tie the safety net there, it couldn’t be mounted so high up. The manager in charge came and asked, “You’re a circus, don’t you have poles?” To explain: at the circus, the net is held up by six poles. These poles are normally 2.8 metres long and are ideal for an apparatus eight metres high. Compared to that, we were now 16 metres up! This meant that our net was six to eight metres further away than usual. What could we do? The premiere was the next day, so we set up the net at the

usual, normal height. Then, as we climbed up to the apparatus and looked down, we saw that it would be quite challenging to fall into, it seemed so small beneath us. The size of the net, of course, was the same. It just appeared to have shrunk from that height, looking down at it so far below the apparatus. I gazed down and wondered what would happen if a trick went wrong. Would the flying acrobat really fall into the net? I can honestly say that I was frightened. We discussed what to do. Maybe we should mount the apparatus lower down? At first, this seemed like a good solution, since there were connecting points there too. But that would mean performing at the height where the flying trapeze was mounted, and our pride would not allow this. In the end, vanity and pride won out, and we stayed at the same height. As part of the story, we had the chance to rehearse before the premiere, but fear had everyone a bit hesitant. Gabi said that he was definitely not going to do anything until the performance the next day. Karcsi took the same view. So it was only my sister who ended up trying out her tricks before the premiere.

The tour lasted a month. I don’t even remember exactly, but for about 35 or 40 performances. The important thing: we did it flawlessly, without messing up a single trick! At the end of each performance, of course, we were always very proud of ourselves. However, we had to pay close attention, because it wasn’t like, “Well, since we’ve done it once, tomorrow’s performance is going to be okay too.” Hell no! Because on two occasions at the end of the production when I did a so-called “swallow” – that is, I dove into the net headfirst, landing on my back – the tensioning rope holding up the net broke twice. Fortunately, these weren’t such life-threatening incidents, and they’re not the important part of the story. What’s important is our audacity: that we were scared shitless, but we wouldn’t have gone a centimetre lower. There was risk involved in this, and not just a little bit! The audience saw and

appreciated it, and we earned the acclaim we received. Also, the way viewers perceive it at the circus, where the dome (ceiling) of the circus is relatively low, if the acrobat is working close under it, then this will also seem high up to the audience. On the other hand, if one is working ten metres up in a sports hall where the ceiling is twenty metres from the floor, even though the show is taking place much higher up than at the circus, the audience will still not be all that impressed by the height.

This contract was memorable from another point of view as well. The organisers crushed our spirits from the very beginning by making us the first number, that is, we opened the entire show. Why did we feel this was an insult? Because we went there as a main attraction. At least we thought we were, but it didn't work out this way. We circus artists know that being the opening number isn't such a good thing, because the audience is still moving around, as there are always latecomers arriving, and people have to stand up to let them get to their seats. In short, they don't pay as much attention in the beginning. Despite all this, luckily, we enjoyed huge success! The artistic director referred to the Hunor group years later, and I think that our appearance there enhanced our international reputation. Were we being brash, or perhaps reckless? Hell if I know. There is vanity in everyone, and we acrobats have more of it than most!

I am reminded of another story related to the Capital Circus of Budapest. Before one of our performances, they told us that the director of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus would be the guest of honour in the auditorium, so we should show him what we could do. We were working on a trick in which Gabi Hunfi did a double somersault from the horizontal bar into my hands, but it wasn't going too well in practice sessions yet. Nevertheless, we decided to attempt it at this very important performance. But we

failed. Gabi fell. There were important people sitting in the VIP box: Imre Budai, the CEO of MACIVA, sitting next to the director of Ringling Brothers, and of course the top circus leadership of the time. I remember after Gabi fell, I sat up in the cradle and saw Budai shaking his head. His quizzical look said it all: "What was that?" With a wave of my hand, I signalled back to him, "Relax, the second try will work out." And it really did! He stayed up! To tell the truth, we repeated it knowing that there was very little chance of it succeeding. On the other hand, the way Budai gestured at me automatically made me feel unfazed and ready to do it anyway. (All right, of course I got lucky that it came off.) We immediately got an American contract with Ringling Brothers, where we didn't actually end up performing for other reasons. Yet we were among the first Hungarians to be offered a contract by them.

The story behind this is that MACIVA contracted two Hungarian teams with the Americans: one was the Váradi teeterboard group, and the other was us, the Hunor group. We should have started at Christmas, except we already had an Italian contract signed lasting until February. This didn't bother Ringling either. Because they really wanted us. They even made an exception for us to only join them after February.

The Váradi group left first. We kept in contact with my Aunt Böbe, who was married to one of the Váradis (Gyurka Weisz). We had no telephone yet at the time, so it was from her handwritten letters that we learned what life was really like at Ringling. Just for comparison: on the Italian tour we lived in a comfortable hotel and ate in a restaurant, whereas in America we would have had to live in a 2.5-metre-wide railway carriage and eaten our meals from our laps. On top of that, our per diem would have been the same in America as what we were earning on the Italian tour: fourteen dollars a day. Not a penny more. We started bargaining with MA-

CIVA. The reason why we were negotiating with them is because, at that time we – all Hungarian circus artists – were employees of MACIVA. This meant that they were the ones who arranged and concluded our contracts. Then our fees for overseas appearances were paid over to MACIVA, as the “boss”. After the company took their share, we received our monthly salary at home as well as a pre-calculated fixed daily allowance for performing abroad.

In the meantime, it also emerged that in contrast to what had been discussed earlier with regard to the Ringling invitation, we would have to do more performances than was stipulated in our collective agreement with MACIVA. Meaning that the extra fees paid to MACIVA should have been paid to us. Of course, they then decided that they didn’t like this situation so much any longer, either, and informed Ringling that the Hunor group would not be able to join the tour. So in the end we didn’t have to travel to America. Instead, we spent years working in Italy.

I have another memory related to the Ringling Brothers circus. In 1971, when I met with Kenneth Feld, the new owner of the outfit, backstage at the Benneweis Circus, he asked me when we were going to work for them in America. To which I replied that I didn’t have the slightest intention of performing with them. This also became international news in the circus world: “Kristóf said no to Ringling!” This was a big deal at the time, when many circus artists would have broken their own arms and legs in order to get to work for Ringling Brothers. I, on the other hand, was able to do this because we never had a problem securing contracts. We worked hard for this success, and so we were never even vulnerable to this kind of exploitation!

Our 1970 Russian tour is another memorable one. At first, we thought that we were going to be performing in Moscow, and then it turned out at the train station there that instead we would be travel-

ling on, straight to Penza. We were very tired, so our escort tried to reassure us: “Penza isn’t so far away! It’s here close by.” Well, that “here close by” actually turned out to be a distance of 600 kilometres. We laughed about this story a lot later on, and jokingly quoted the Russian escort to refer to places that weren’t so near to us.

Compensating for the long journey was the fact that we got to work in a very nice circus building. Our accommodation was also acceptable, even though it wasn’t in a hotel. The circus rented the first and second floors of a building in a housing estate for its artists. Our apartment had a furnished kitchen with an unusual refrigerator: under the kitchen window, the brick wall had been demolished and the gap was covered with a wood panel. Standing in front of that was the fridge. So the Russian cold – it was minus 15 degrees outside – froze everything in it. The need for refrigeration had led to this highly unique method being implemented throughout the entire building. My God, we had many good laughs about this!

We were halfway into our three-month contract when we received news that rattled us a bit: the party leadership in Kemerovo had learned about us and indicated that they were also ready to welcome us warmly. As it turned out, no Hungarian circus artist had ever visited that small Siberian town, so we had to go, even though we had no wish to perform there at all. However, the director of the Rosgos Circus, who was like a god in Russia, made it clear: we had to go!

“We have to go to Kemerovo. Do you know anything about what it’s like there?” I asked Theresa Durova, who was performing a mixed animal number in the Russian show. (The Durovs, incidentally, were a family of world-famous animal trainers.) Theresa was very kind, we became good friends almost from the first moment. I was even able to speak with her, thanks to my Russian studies at school and the other bits of the language that had stuck with me from our 1960 Russian tour. Theresa clutched her head when she

heard the name of the city. This wasn't too reassuring. It turned out that the outside temperature in Kemerovo is usually around -30 degrees, but -40 isn't unheard of either, as it's a Siberian town. It also didn't sound so appealing to learn that the venue for our performances would be a little old wooden circus. I even called MACIVA to tell them that we were ready to go home, but certainly not to Kemerovo. "I don't know what to do, Pityu. You have to go there," is all Gyuri Heitz would say, abruptly closing the issue. (As MACIVA's chief stage director and the head of the artistic department, Gyuri had put together the Russian tour and was responsible for its success.) What could we do? Off we went to Kemerova.

Anxiously, we installed our equipment in the little wooden circus building, fearful that it would tear the roof off the building. Fortunately, however, it was a very stable little building and though it creaked a bit, it didn't move. It turned out later that our fear of the cold was also unfounded because it was very warm in the circus building. Coal was plentiful, so heating was no problem, given that Kemerovo is one of the country's major mining towns. To be honest, I have to admit that they took much better care of us there than in Penza. We were looked after wonderfully! We stayed in the best hotel and always had a car at our disposal when the girls went shopping. After a while, we realised that this Kemerovo contract was quite a pleasant "disappointment"!

At the same time, things have happened over the years that I now very much regret, even if we couldn't do anything about them. I am sorry that we did not attend the elaborate opening gala of the newly built Capital Circus of Budapest on 14 January 1971. We were listed on the programme guide and planned to come – because we wanted to – but in the end things turned out differently. We were working in Italy at the Moira Orfei, one of the largest circuses in the country. This beautiful, gigantic circus had 5,000 people in

the company and two rings: one covered with ice and the other a traditional one. By the way, these appearances were already part of a previously signed contract, and when MACIVA signed it, no one knew exactly when the new Capital Circus building would be opened and handed over. In the days when the inaugural gala was being discussed at home, we were in Sicily with Moira. When it became pretty much clear that the big day would be 14 January, MACIVA contacted both me and Walter Nones, the director of the Italian circus, because they really wanted the Hunor group to be there for the opening gala. Right, but the problem was that the first month of the year is an important holiday period for Italians. It's so important that schoolchildren even get a holiday at this time, because "Befana", the witch who brings them gifts, according to Italian tradition, arrives on 6 January. The director knew that the reopening of the Capital Circus was a very important event for us, so – very reluctantly – he finally agreed to let us go home. He had one stipulation: that we could only be away for ten days, and not one day more. This condition was understandable, as they also had a gala scheduled for this time, for which they had already sold all the tickets in advance. He insisted that the Hunor group be present at this show. We agreed to return in time.

We thought everything was settled then, except that in January 1971 blizzards had all of Europe covered in snow, even Sicily! And this presented such an obstacle that we had to face the fact that it would be completely impossible to travel back and forth in ten days with our small bus. (At that time, there was no Croatian-Slovenian motorway, so we would have had to drive through Austria.) Anyway, even if there had been no snow, it would still have been a very rushed trip with an extremely tight schedule. However, the snow completely upended our calculations, and we could not take this risk! The Hungarian directors understood this, although they

had little choice in the matter. To be honest, we didn't mind so much at the time that things turned out this way, but today I am sorry that we were unable to be present at the opening of our newly built magnificent circus building. At that time, I had no idea that my relationship with the Capital Circus of Budapest would grow even closer later on...

We had achieved a standard of quality and were world-famous. For this work, both the catchers and the fliers must be in good shape and completely healthy: they cannot do it with any serious injuries. Of course, when one is young, it does not even cross one's mind how much of a toll the performances and exercises, that is, the work of the acrobat, takes on our bodies and our health. To me too, all that mattered was that I loved doing this and wanted to be one of the best catchers in the world! What did I care what the consequences might be later? Why would I have thought that I might even wind up in a wheelchair by the time I was 30 or 40? It honestly never occurred to me. Like elite athletes, the acrobat is concerned with nothing except striving for his goal right there and then!

And then came this damned constant lower back pain. Sometimes it was so bad that I couldn't get up. There was talk of surgery, but none of the doctors I saw could promise I'd be okay after that. We were in Copenhagen in 1971 at the Benneweis Circus. It was a beautiful permanent circus building. I really enjoyed working there. I performed in the air with the Hunor group and did our perch and teeterboard numbers with Ili. We were the star artists! And then my back gave out. The director was tearing his hair out because these performances had been sold out in advance. Even though I went to see a doctor, he couldn't work a miracle. He said I needed at least a week to recover, but it might take as long as ten days. I paid no heed to the doctor, but instead continued to work.

Half an hour before each performance, he would come and give me two injections in my spine, which made me feel a little better and able to work. Each time, the doctor told me that if I carried on like this, one day I would suddenly find myself paralysed. I didn't listen to him. Thanks to the injections, the pain would go away, and I could go out into the ring again. However, the symptoms became more and more frequent, and by then, I understood that there really was something wrong.

I wasn't even worried about being paralysed. Rather, I was afraid something might happen during the performance that made me unable to finish the number. News of this kind of occurrence spreads through the circus world very swiftly, and then they can say, "Well fine, the Hunor group have a super production, but they're fragile." In other words, our production will be perceived as unreliable, and no one will dare buy it: they'll be afraid to award us a contract.

There's no such thing in the circus as having "someone else jump in for me" if I fall out. I've had the entire trunk of my body plastered up quite a few times over the years. I loved working in the air, and I am still in love with it to this day. When one knows how to do something that few others can do after him and is really good at it, it is not easy to leave it behind. I vividly remember the day when we finally reached the absolute end of the road.

While working, my back gave out, and I felt that right there, at that moment, I couldn't even finish the number with the Hunor group. I threw myself into the net. Or more precisely, I limply fell into it, and then was assisted out of it. My sister simply said, "Pityu, this can't go on like this. Let's end it."

I had to admit that it was over. By then, I had already been thinking about calling it a day for some time, but to say so was a huge responsibility in the case of a group. After all, I had my partners there,

what would happen to them? If they continued as aerialists, they would need to replace me with another catcher, and this isn't a quick process: it takes time to find one. They never even managed to find a catcher like me, so they had to reconfigure production. After I left, they stopped using the name Hunor. It was over.

After I quit aerial acrobatics, the symptoms in my back gradually diminished. I was still able to work with Ili, because our duo number placed a different load on me, one that didn't cause as much trouble for my spine. The problem persisted, of course. Unfortunately, all it took was a single wrong movement to retrigger the back pain. I still go to see a doctor about it, but I think that I can endure the pain for my few remaining years without surgery.

I started performing with my sister in 1958, and then came the Hunor group and its wonderful years of success, which ended in the summer of 1972.

But this aerial number still lives inside of me forever.



My father, Christoph the strongman on a printed postcard (1951)



Mihály Sallai and Ilike at Hungária street (1951)



3 Sallai: Mihály Sallai, Misi and Ilike at Linderhof variety in Zwickau (1956)



Bathing Aida, Transdanubian Circus (1954)



"Pas de deux" with Ili atop Aida, Thessaloniki (1963)



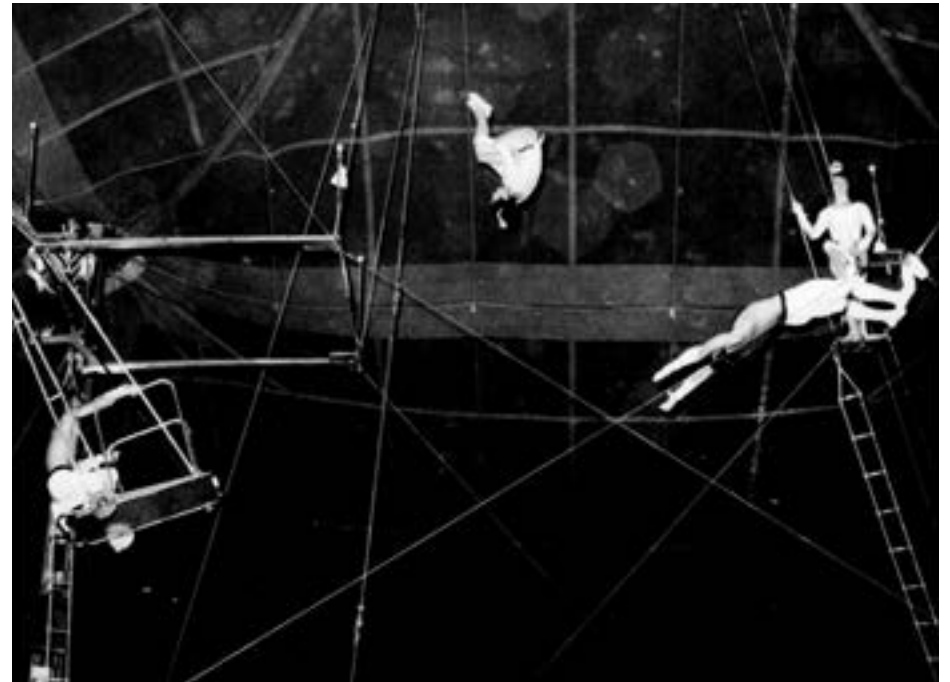
My father and myself, Thessaloniki (1963)



With the Panov group, Gabrovo (1959)



On the beach with Ili, Varna (1962)



The Hunor group with swing - Elfi Althoff Jacobi (1970)



With Panni, Capital Circus of Budapest (1960)



Me (1960)



lfi (1960)



Aida, placard for the Arizona nightclub (from the Tamás Vajda collection)



My mother (1960)



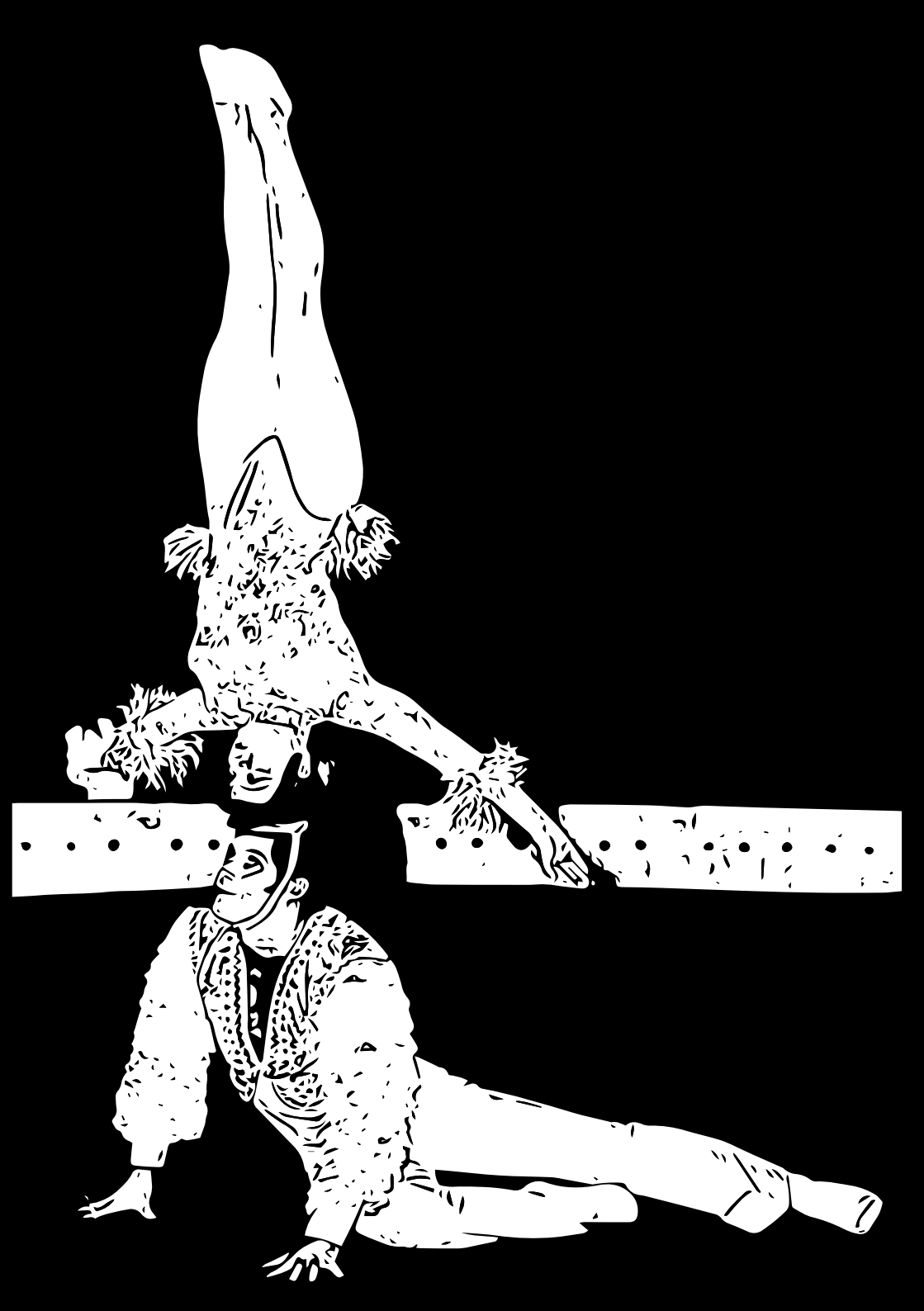
József "Szöcske" Szilágyi, Panni and myself (1962)



Hunor group, Italy (1965)



My father, the "French Hercules", Denmark (1970)



CHAPTER
TWO

A WEDDING IN A SPECIAL PLACE

I think about Ili and our life together frequently these days. It's no coincidence that she was the one I married! My precious darling, if you were sitting here next to me now, there's no question you would say, "Damn it, Pityu, after everything I did to make you marry me!" Because she really was deeply in love with me.

We were still kids when I informed her that, when we were bigger, I would marry her, and we would do a Morvai-style teeterboard act together. This genre was of Hungarian origin, first developed by Gyuszi Morvai with his stepdaughter, Valika. They deserved their fame, because they did some serious tricks and earned huge fees for their performances in the top variety shows in Europe. Later on, even before us, this teeterboard number was adopted by others like "Binder Binder", as János Binder was known. Although they were not able to match Morvai's standard in technical terms, they did surpass it in appearance, departing from what had until then been the usual look with a variety show-type style, with beautiful costumes, including the spectacular feathered decoration that was then coming into vogue.

I also remember our first kiss: Ili was 12 years old, and I was 15. It was almost natural from our childhood that she belonged to me. The professional world around us also registered this fact, and the boys of our time knew that Ilike Sallai was to be left alone, because she was Pityu's! Standing at No. 38 Gorkij (now "Városligeti fasor") Boulevard was the building of the Arts Union, two rooms of which were given over to the Circus Artists' Union in the wintertime. Here we gathered on Saturdays, after the season was over. In the smaller room, the older artists played cards or chess

and talked, and in the larger room, we young people danced. I remember we had a great time because we had everything we needed for great fun: we even had a gramophone! We always looked forward to those Saturdays, because for us circus artists on the road most of the year, that was the only opportunity we had to meet, get to know and court each other. Of course, this does not mean that we would not have chatted up "civilian" girls when the opportunity arose. Of course not! However, since the circus is a large, closed family, in most cases we ended up choosing our partners from within the profession.

Ili's mother and my mother were very close friends, and were even distant relatives, although there's nothing remarkable about that, since almost every circus is like that. If we were to start researching family trees now, it would surely turn out that one of my great or great-great grandmothers or grandfathers had already been married to someone else before, or at least in a close relationship. As truly close girlfriends often do, our mothers met on a regular basis to thoroughly discuss everything and everyone. Involuntarily, I ended up being a frequent topic of conversation, as I regularly visited the Moulin Rouge at No. 17 Nagymező Street, where the dancers liked me a lot. To put it in a nutshell: I was a bit of a naughty rascal. My mother herself complained a lot about this to Ili's mother, Ilonka, who thus knew almost everything about me. This later became a complication! The two friends even quarrelled over us. Whatever happened, Mum always defended me. And Ili's mother wanted to protect her. "If you don't let my son marry your daughter, I won't let her marry my son, either!" my mother once retorted to Ilonka.

I asked for Ili's hand in marriage while we were on a tour together in 1962. I told her father that my intentions were serious and, as was the custom at the time, I asked permission to court her. "Fine. But please, Pityu, just don't mislead my daughter!" was Mr Sallai's

answer, because he adored his daughter. As I recall, Ili's mother did not exactly react to hearing of our plans for the future with an outburst of joy. "What, are you pregnant?" Ilonka exclaimed as Ili told her we would be marrying in the future. "No engagement or anything?"

With great sadness, my Ilike informed me that there was a bit of a problem with her mother regarding our marriage plans. However, I calmed her down and assured her that I would fix the situation. It was already evening when I arrived at Ili's family's caravan parked on Hungária Boulevard. As I entered the door, Mr Sallai exclaimed, "Come on, Pityu is here! He's here to talk about the proposal!" I saw Ili's mother lying on the bed. "Go straight to hell!" she said, turning angrily to the wall "He's not going to get my daughter!" However, my future father-in-law refused to give up and attempted to resolve the situation: "Ilonka, please don't do this!"

The story then continued with us going ahead and getting engaged. With a ring, of course, as is proper!

Although we were engaged, Ili and I still lived separately during this period: she lived in the caravan with her parents, and I was in the so-called "emergency housing" – a bedroom, kitchen and bathroom – that I shared with my family. I asked my uncle, Józsi Richter, for a loan of 10,000 forints for our wedding. "We have a contract, Uncle Józsi, so I'll be able to pay the money back," I promised him (and I kept my word later). We used it to pay for the wedding lunch at the restaurant in the City Park: there was broth, fried cutlets and pickles. The remaining money went on the wedding clothes. This loan covered a lot of things, as 10,000 forints was a lot of money back then. In those years, it was not really possible to get ready-made suits in stores, so if you wanted to look elegant somewhere, you had to have one tailored for you. Most of the circus artists were penniless, though the envied star artists wore "Salamon" suits when carousing at the Moulin

Rouge, apparel ordered from the highly fashionable tailor's shop of that name on Jókai Square. We were just kids, but we were already saving our money, so I begged our parents to let us have a Salamon suit too, as well as some Lakatos shoes, because that was the other big hit. If you had a pair of elegant shoes from Ó Street behind the Opera, you were really someone.

Ili and I had our wedding clothes made too. My wife's wedding dress was made by a friend on Baross Street. It wasn't too difficult for the seamstress, as she had made several costumes for Ili before, so she knew her exact measurements. The tailoring was not so easy in my case! As an aerial gymnast, I never had a standard size, because of my wide shoulders and long arms. Anyway, I haven't ever purchased myself an off-the-shelf jacket since then either. I always have to have them tailored for me. I keep our wedding photos framed to this day; Ili was a beautiful bride!

The civil ceremony was held in Wedding Hall No. 1. From there, we went to the Capital Circus. Interestingly, the Circus has somehow always been a part of my life, since as a child I longed to perform on this stage, and then it ended up serving as the venue for my wedding. Much later on, it again became the site of important years in my life.

Looking back at it, today I am glad that the post-ceremony party was organised at the circus, although there was also a practical reason for choosing the venue at the time: we could use it for free. Our band – composed of Gyuszi Zsilák, Ferkó Mogyorósi, Öcsi Picard, Imike Baross and Karcsi Körösényi – played dance music all night as their gift to us. Anyway, what you can say about our entire wedding is that everyone contributed what they could. Those were different times we were living in...

Back then, everyone was "equal", in a financial sense. We knew that tomorrow and the next day we would have something to eat,

but no one knew what would happen after that. Now that I think back to that period, I'm sure we couldn't have had a more beautiful wedding than the one we had there at the Capital Circus! We spent the wedding night at the Royal Hotel, but we couldn't relax much, as our train was leaving two days later to take us on our adventurous „honeymoon” tour...

SHE WAS LIKE MY HANDS AND FEET

Ili was one of the finest acrobats in the country. She could stand on her head like other people stand on their feet, and if she had to take a leap, she did that flawlessly as well. She had no fear of the perch at all, practically “running” up the iron pole to stand on her head at dizzying heights. She always performed her tasks perfectly. “Miss, from your little toes to the top of your head, you are the most complete female acrobat I've ever seen,” Fredy Knie Sr, director of the world-famous Knie Circus, told her after seeing us on the Benneweis Circus show.

In professional terms, we prepared very consciously for our life together. Although the teeterboard had been what we had both wished for since childhood, it did not end up becoming our first number, as we opted for the perch instead. The latter seemed the more logical for the first production, since we would not be starting from scratch. Ili did the headstand and the handstand; all I had to do was learn how to balance the pole on my head. Before our wedding, in 1962, the year I asked her to marry me, when Ili was still working with her father and brother in the Sallai rolling globe number and I was with my sister in the Hunor group, I had already started practising with a handmade perch with the help of my friend Szöcske. At the end of a tube, we mounted a wooden forehead piece, tied two 24-kilo hammers to it, and then pulled this home-made pole up with a safety line. I then stood under it, and we lowered it down onto my forehead. The practice actually consisted of me holding this nearly 50-kilo pole on my forehead for longer and longer periods. Szöcske watched the time and counted the minutes.

“How long has it been?” I asked him, and he would invariably respond, “It’s only been three minutes!” He always liked to trick me a little bit. With the perch, the “untermann”, the person holding the pole, has to learn how to feel the balance and react in time if the pole starts to tilt. The “obermann”, the one up top, notices this immediately, but cannot do anything about it. The untermann, whenever this happens, needs to keep it stable, and this can only be achieved with plenty of practice. Fortunately, however, this is also like riding a bicycle: once you master how to do it, you never forget.

When we were married in 1963, Ili became not only my wife, but also my partner at work. We became the “Two Kristof”. Our first joint “honeymoon” tour started right after our wedding. However, even though we were travelling as a couple, we were still working separately. Our first stop was Sofia. I can tell you it was almost like coming home, because Ili and I had both worked there before. Unfortunately, the beautiful Sofia circus has burned down since then. We had a great time there despite earning terribly little money. The four leva that were our daily allowance were just enough for a one-course meal in the restaurant, so most of our wages went on lunch. We got paid every week and a half, often we only had enough money left over for the last two days for bread and dripping with tea. In truth, I have to admit, managing finances was not our strength. Despite all this, Ili and I were always cheerful and happy together.

The next destination on our tour was Greece. Although here we got a lodging allowance and a per diem, we were still pretty damned skint. (Only fifty percent of our second-class allowance and accommodation money was ours: the rest went to our employer, MACIVA.) And as if that wasn’t enough, we had to find our housing and solve any related problems ourselves. Fortunately, however, we managed to rent private flats in Thessaloniki and Athens at a relatively good price, so we got away cheaper than we would have done if we

had stayed in a hotel. We lived comfortably in our little rented flat, and I remember how divinely my wife cooked! As a circus child, incidentally, my Ilike had to take on household chores relatively early in life, as she was needed to look after her father and brother when they were on tour abroad. She was only ten years old when she started cooking for them. She once told me a story. When they were performing in a local variety show in West Germany, their neighbours were amazed. Because their landlord told everyone, “Look at this kid working from morning until night: she performs, earns money, and then cooks, washes and cleans!”

Anyway, returning to our “honeymoon” tour, our circus troupe got on a ship after finishing in Greece. Our next destination was Cyprus. There we were joined by Ili’s sister, Éva, who came to gradually take over my wife’s place in the Sallai rolling globe number. Although we had previously discussed the possibility of my joining their production after our wedding, we soon realised this was not a good idea. After all, I’m just an aerial gymnast! By the way, we also had the eight-metre-long perch with us on the tour, and we practised with it constantly. Ili climbed up attached to a safety rope (or lunge), and I held it. Our tour, which started in February, lasted until mid-November and remained unforgettable for us in many ways. On the one hand, because we travelled to several countries and had fantastic experiences during the months-long journey, and on the other hand, because it rewrote our previous plans. This is because there was an incident on our sea voyage. As the Greek producer touring with the show absconded without paying for local help, this left little manpower to dismantle and stow away MACIVA’s large tent. We, the Hunor group, stayed behind and volunteered to help with this task after packing our own equipment. The other members of the company, on the other hand, set off (leaving the tent to be pulled down) and occupied the cabins

on the ship. When we boarded later, I learned that the only berths left for us were below deck, in bunks alongside the drunken musicians, who were already intoxicated by then. I flew into a rage and told the head of the company that I would throw him into the sea if he didn't get Ili and me a regular cabin. We got the cabin. However, this incident meant that the tour would not be followed by another circus contract, but by the army barracks. All this took place at the time when circus artists eligible for conscription escaped the military, because, somehow, they were always at the bottom of the list and so didn't have to enlist. (And if they got out of it until the age of 23, they were then overage and then safe from the two years of mandatory military service.)

Today, of course, I know I was lucky to be enlisted, because it could have been a serious scandal for threatening to throw the head of the company into the water. Thanks to the discipline I received over the ship incident, I received my draft notice. Why do I think there is a connection? Because I learned that Imre Budai, the director of MACIVA at the time, was in contact with the Ministry of Defence and wrote them a letter saying, "I have a talented young acrobat, but he is uncooperative. He should be educated." And yes, that's how it worked in those years. When a young circus artist said, "I don't want to go to this place or that place," then loyal apparatchik Comrade Budai's reply to the resistance was, "Well then, if that's how it is, you're joining the army!"

To this day, I am grateful to the administrative officer at the Auxiliary Command. Who knows why, but he was very nice to me and arranged for me to be "renumbered". According to my original number, I would have served as an artilleryman in Lenti, near the Yugoslavian border, which was known to be one of the worst postings in the country. Besides, I wouldn't even have been able to come home on leave, because by the time my train arrived in Budapest, it would already be nearly time

to head back. Thanks to this officer, I instead ended up at the Miklós Zrínyi Military Academy in Budapest, as a "guard and attendant". My God, those 24-hour watches were something awful! At the corner of Hungária Boulevard and the barracks, there was a booth I had to stand in, at strict attention. The wind was blowing, it was minus 25 degrees, and the tiny ice particles in the snow cut into my face.

Other than that, I was still lucky! This is because our commander-in-chief was studying to be an architect and was only serving in the military to support his five children during his university studies. In other words, he was what we called an "anti-soldier". He didn't take the rules seriously. For example, he often called me in to play button football in his office.

Anyway, I think he developed a liking for me when I rushed to the aid of one of my fellow soldiers during a drill. We had to go running in a gas mask and full kit, but this was too much for our comrade, and he grew ill. I clasped him in my arms and ran him to the doctor's office. I complained to him many times that two years in the military could ruin my acrobatic career with my wife. The commander understood my problem and gave me special permission to leave every afternoon: each day after five o'clock, I was admitted through a small gate on Hós Street, so Ili and I could go to the MACIVA practice halls to train!

My sergeant later even allowed me to leave and sleep away from the barracks with Ili. I just had to make sure to be back at six in the morning, but this was no problem since it was only five trolley bus stops away. Sometimes this worked out badly for me, because right when I got back there was a changing of the guard and I had to go to the booth for a 24-hour watch. I was always afraid that I might fall asleep on my feet at such times. The swearing-in of the new recruits who had completed basic training was approaching, which is a big deal. "This calls for a celebration," my commander said. "You're with the circus. Do you have any ideas?" I nod-

ded. „Of course I do!” Naturally, I brought over circus artists. Since we had been guests at the Moulin Rouge and worked at the Kamera Variety Show together, I knew all kinds of people. Among the artists who came were István S. Nagy, Lenke Lóránt, Lehel Németh, Gyula Kabos, as well as my father, performing as a strong man. The show was a huge success. They said they had never had a swearing-in like that before! Of course they hadn't. After all, I practically brought an entire circus to the barracks!

At the banquet after the oath, only two outstanding soldiers were allowed to sit with their parents at Colonel General Reményi's long table. I was one of them. I received another reward for the show: after two and a half months of military service, I was sent home upon receiving my documents certifying me as a qualified marksman. I remember when I went into the circus after being released, and Comrade Budai came up to me and asked me in amazement, “What is it Kristóf? Civilian clothes? Civilian clothes?” I reached into my waistcoat pocket, took out my ID and showed it to him proudly: “Permanently discharged! Permanently discharged!” (What makes the story even juicier is that years later, it was the same Imre Budai who finally appointed me director of the Capital Circus.)

Two years after I started working on the perch with Ili in 1964, fate accidentally had my friend Szócske again signed to the same circus in Italy as us. The reason why this is important to mention is because my friend played a big part in our finally becoming a teeterboard duo! In truth, the original plan was for the Hunor group to develop another number, and we had a teeterboard made for this purpose. We started practising, but soon realised it wasn't a good idea. But we still had the prop, the teeterboard.

In the Italian circus where we were working for the Christmas season, as a reinforcement, so to speak, they signed the “Binder Binders” to perform a small two-person teeterboard act. “Why

don't you do the same number with your wife?” the director, Liana Orfei, asked us. This question came at a good time, as Ili and I had long wished to do the duo acrobatic act together. “If we do, will you sign us?” I asked in response, and Liana immediately exclaimed, “Yes!”

Ili and I started practising, which, frankly, didn't go easily because we got into a lot of quarrels. I once even told Ili to buy a pick and smash up the board, because we were always just arguing about it. By the way, it is natural during rehearsals for the situation to often grow tense. Why did we quarrel? Because the tricks weren't working. We slapped each other on the head to say “You ruined it. You're the reason it failed. Why don't you pay more attention?” To put it simply, we were constantly blaming each other. And this is where my friend Szócske comes into the picture again. Honestly, if he hadn't been there with us then, we probably would never have developed a teeterboard number. (And Ili and I would have killed each other while practising.) He didn't help us to reconcile, but to practise. For example, when I growled, “Damn this rotten board! Who needs it?” Then the next day he knocked on the door of our caravan saying, “Come on and practise!” That's exactly what it took for Ili and me to look at each other and continue the exercise. After all, deep down in our hearts, we both knew we wanted this teeterboard number. The practice lasted for about a year, exactly the amount of time Szócske was with us. Just a week before he went on to travel with his (Picard) group for their next contract, Ili and I introduced our duo teeterboard act. I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say this number would still hold up well today!

Looking back on these stories of ours today, I just smile and think everything was beautiful exactly the way it happened. Even our quarrels. Because they always only lasted until the end of the prac-

tice session or the performance. If we argued, in most cases it was over work. We were able to get into terrible rows, Ili and I, and then anything could happen. When I yelled at her, she yelled back or hit me with her slippers. Sometimes we even fought physically. And yes, all this could even occur at a performance. If something was wrong, my Ilike immediately let me know, and of course the audience never noticed anything. There was no way for them to notice, since these were small but definite signs: it was enough, for example, for her to climb the perch more vigorously than usual. I kept her on my head, but with each push I could feel that my wife was furious with me.

“Not all slaps are the same,” a wise and experienced colleague of mine once remarked. And this is indeed true. Because in our world there is the “professional slap”, which must not be confused with a “regular” slap. (My son, Kristian, for example, was never slapped. A contributing factor to this is the fact that I got a lot of them when I was a kid, and later on, when I became a parent, I vowed never to hit my child! Never!)

The professional slap, which snaps suddenly, is over just as quickly. We go on and don’t even remember it, because it happened during work, during the rehearsal. I don’t think anyone who isn’t in this world understands that. And there really is nothing remarkable about it. We acrobats can separate our work from our private lives, and we accept that the problems that come from our work are sometimes impossible to ignore and can “snap”, as we do dangerous things, often playing with our lives. That’s why we live for our work: that’s where we are socialised, and that’s how we grew up. As children, we saw our predecessor acrobats insulting each other’s mothers after the performance, but we also saw them making huge sacrifices for each other. This is the amazing thing in this career, and what’s really amazing is that when the rehearsal or performance was over, the anger was over too.

After our quarrels, it was as if nothing had happened at all. Ili climbed ten metres up in the air again. We might have been ready to strangle each other the day before, but the next day she entrusted her life to me again. Whatever happened, Ili and I were always very attached to each other. When I was still courting her, and life (or more precisely, a circus contract) separated us for a while, Ili wrote me a letter every day. I still have most of them today. We had a beautiful life together, complementing each other in both our private and professional lives. It was a very special relationship. I don’t think one like this can develop in the same way in private life. To me, Ili was like my hands and feet. We experienced many things together and found ourselves in many amusing situations. For example, some circuses “separated” us, meaning not from each other, but if we had two numbers in different parts of the show, the directors decided we should also have different names. This is how our perch number became “Duo Kristof” and the duo teeterboard became “Duo Istvan”.

Another funny incident took place in 1968, in Genoa. We were performing with the Liana Orfei Circus. Ili would put on a Hungarian folk costume and wear her hair in girlish ponytails. And I always looked older than my age. Attending one of the performances was the Hungarian director of a large commercial company, who came to us after the show and said, “What a cute little girl you work with!” “That little girl is my wife,” I replied, laughing, but the look of scepticism on his face made me unsure he believed me. Ili and I always enjoyed recalling these stories afterwards. However, there are other sides to the circus artist’s life too. We were young newlyweds when we toured Cyprus with a Hungarian performance. We had a nice daily allowance of £5, including for accommodation, which meant we would have had to pay for a hotel out of that money. Yes, but the only acceptable hotel was very expensive, two to three

pounds a night, so any way we calculated it, there would be little money to pay for everything else. We had to finesse a way to keep as much of our salary as possible. The circus musicians came up with very unique solutions, for example: they tossed their money together and five of them rented some horrible, so called basement rooms. As a young couple, this solution did not appeal to us so much, so I had to figure out how I could build super comfortable accommodation for ourselves. What I found was the lorry we used to haul the seating for the audience, which was ten metres long and two-and-a-half metres wide, with good high side walls. At the end of this, I set up a little dog tent that the dog trainer Ibike Gazdag offered us. Considering the conditions, we were able to arrange it comfortably, as we had a mattress, a table and even a chair. We had electricity hooked up and bought ourselves a gas ring. In the end, we managed to put together a comfortable little apartment!

Nicosia remains an eternal memory. It was summer and so hot it that the one daily shower in the yard that was made available to us only ran with hot water. We suffered from the heat. Wrapping a sheet over ourselves, we stood in it in the shower, and then we slept wrapped in the wet cloth. Since it was too hot to stay in the tent, we lay under the carriage in the shade, because there was a little bit of air down there. The trials of a circus artist's life are sometimes not just in the ring. Everything is determined by the circus lifestyle, which overwrites many other things. This is how we have to eat, how we have to enjoy the beach and how we have to make love: so that we can do the show. There are questions that never go away: "Can I eat as much as I want and drink as much wine as I like?" The answer is simple, because it all depends on how many performances I have that day (or the next day).

Anyway, there is a huge difference between the performance and the practice. We need to watch our weight during the practice pe-

riod because we might gain a kilo and a half or even two kilos. On the other hand, when there is a performance (especially if there are two in a day), the stress ensures we won't put on even a single gramme. I've always loved to eat, I never regretted spending money on that, but during our years as active artists, Ili and I really only ate one meal a day, in the evening. We didn't eat much for breakfast and lunch, and in the summer, we restricted our consumption of liquids, because all the water made us sweat. Then, when the performance was over, it was time for a hearty dinner!

How else did we have to take care of ourselves? Well! Among other things, we never went skiing, and we could only play football in our own gentle fashion, even though when we were young, each circus had its own football team. When two circuses were working in close proximity, we battled out great football matches against each other. Although we always took care not to hurt ourselves or each other, the circus directors were not very happy about such encounters. In Italy, for example, the director stated that anyone who got injured would no longer be allowed to travel with the circus. They would remain where they were and would only be able to rejoin the company once they had recovered.

Our entire lives are impacted by our work. At least it impacted Ili and me. An hour before the performance, I couldn't even talk to her, because it was her time: bathing, makeup, cigarette, costume, and then work. This ritual was important to her, as we did productions in which she could have died if she fell. It's an unwritten rule that you always have to be backstage by the ring when the number before yours starts. We were always there three numbers earlier. Part of the preparation was warming up, or as we call it, "softening". Ili and I always softened ahead of time. Before the performance, before the audience was allowed in, we went into the ring and warmed up for a good 40 minutes, doing handstands and lifts.

I always did nine overhead presses with her, meaning my partner put back her hands, then I grabbed her, lifted her entire weight up and down, then let go again. The reason it was nine times is because that is my lucky number.

It is very difficult to warm up in a tent circus when it is cold and raining. We still have to, though. And this difficulty could be further increased, for example, when water was flowing into the ring entrance at the back due to torrential rain. Of course, the spectators sensed nothing of this. Just as they didn't see me balancing between the puddles in my knee-length white suit pants and rubber boots in the pouring rain, with my shoes in hand, because they also had to stay spotlessly clean. Why was this so important? Because I think part of respecting the audience is not only making sure that our work is flawless: our appearances have to be immaculate as well.

Once we were working in Italy in August, in 35-degree heat. The circus was set up on the seashore, in a nice big tent with space for more than two thousand viewers. Except now sometimes there would only be 20 people sitting in the stands. But regardless of this, Ili's make-up at every show was as perfect as it was at a premiere attended by a full house! This is the kind of demand that the circus artist places on themselves, to scintillate not only at the premiere, but to also pay attention to one's appearance on weekdays, because this matters to the viewer, and they should not go home disappointed. The weather influenced our work many times. This can be illustrated by a key memory of what happened to us in Copenhagen. We were performing in Tivoli Park, on a beautiful open-air stage. Up above was a fan-shaped canopy that could be pulled over the stage. This was important for us, because you can't work with the perch in the open air, as you need a point above you to watch in order to keep the balance and so the pole straight. (If

the weather is clear, then it might work, but if a cloud floats into the sky, then I will lose my reference point and I can't tell if it's the cloud that's moving or if the perch is tilting.)

The "stage manager" was tasked with monitoring the weather. He was a very strict man who would cancel the show immediately after he felt three raindrops. We were just on the stage doing our perch number when it became apparent that the stage manager was constantly scrutinising the sky. We were just about to start the last trick when three drops of rain fell. "No!" shouted the stage director, signalling to us that we were to halt the act immediately.

"Let us just do this one last trick! 50 seconds!" I pleaded, but he was adamant and kept shouting, "No, no, no!" as he energetically ushered us off the stage. We often referred to this incident afterwards: "It's Tivoli weather!" Ili and I would laugh whenever the sky clouded over and it started to rain.

We toured half the world together and performed in the biggest circuses: in England, the Netherlands, Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, the Philippines and Austria. We were on the road all the time. We knew that there were people who did not like us, but envy is part of the profession, so to speak. The reason was always the contract and the money one earned abroad. Sometimes a "dear" colleague went to Comrade Budai to complain: lots of people do not understand why Pityu Kristóf and his wife are always working in the West and haven't been on a Russian tour yet. These "denouncers" did not know much. Like many of our other tours, our Irish tour was not nearly as comfortable as they might have imagined at home in Hungary, as it was raining constantly, and we had to travel every two or three days. The Arlette Gruss Circus (at the time called the "French Circus") was beautiful, but at most stops it would be set up in a large meadow outside whatever city we were visiting, and since the technical team couldn't construct the ring properly, I practically

had to hoe the ground and pull out the tufts of grass in order to keep our teeterboard from tilting. In addition, we had trouble with the local kids. I've been to many places, but I've never in my life encountered punks as bad as the ones I saw in Ireland! Except, maybe in Sicily, where if I left my rubber boots outside under the caravan, they were generally stolen by the morning.

In Ireland, we got power from a generator that only worked for a fixed amount of time, which meant the electricity went out at midnight and was turned back on at ten the next morning, then the machine was restarted. You can imagine how comfortable this must have been. What could we do? If there was a residential house near where the circus was, we went to the owners and asked them to let us hook up to their power supply. We only asked for enough electricity those few days to get the television and refrigerator working, and of course, we offered to pay. Fortunately, the local adults were very generous, we were always able to reach an agreement with them, and they helped us out. Everything seemed fine, we seemed to have solved the power generation problem. Then one night, while we were watching the telly, boom! Sudden darkness. The power was out. We set out with a torch to find out the cause of the problem, because we had no idea what might have happened. The mystery was soon resolved: the local kids had been amusing themselves by stuffing a petrol-soaked cloth under the cable and setting it on fire.

Well, that's what happened to us in the "West". Of course, no one at home in Hungary knew anything about this. All they were thinking was that we were working "out there", where everything was super. Between 1964 and 1986, we almost never came home, except as guests. On the rare occasions when we were at home, we didn't even unload our things from the caravan. We didn't even need to, since Ili had two sets of everything. Truth be told, we didn't even move

back into the building ourselves either, we only went in to use the bathroom, because it was more comfortable in the flat. But for us, the caravan was our real home. We enjoyed living in it.

When we were at home and happened not to be working, after a week we would miss the ring so much that we went to practise. We were very much of the same mind in this regard: we needed to practise. For a long time, I thought I was the strict one, but my Ilike regularly denied this. If we had done only half of everything we did on the stage as "Duo Kristof", there would actually have been no problem. But that was not enough for us, we were striving for the maximum! That's why we worked so much, repeating the exercises a hundred times and quarrelled – often loudly – in the rehearsal room. In doing this, we both damaged our health a bit. Ili's knees and hips were finished, and then the time came when we started doing our work with painkillers. Kalmopyrin gave her some relief. This is another side of an acrobat's life. But it's not visible from the outside. In truth, we gained everything that is good and beautiful, but we have also suffered adversity. Still, the kind of togetherness I had with Ili somehow helped us through everything. The reason I say this is just to confirm that it is in the world of the circus that such deep connections can best be established.

We circus artists live differently than ordinary people do, as we wake up together, work together and spend almost every minute of our days together. True, we're also exposed to temptations as circus artists, but I think if a couple can endure the first ten to fifteen years and stick together, they'll definitely stay together for the rest of their lives. From our wedding day on, Ili and I were always together. Our relationship was special, as she literally entrusted her life to me in our work. If the question is whether we were able to live an everyday life at home, I would ask in response: "What does it mean to have an everyday life?" Of course, Ili cooked the same way as other

housewives did, and then we had dinner, and then, if we felt like it, we watched some more telly. And we often went fishing too. However, we were never able to relax, because the circus was the subject of our lives at home as well.

We always made decisions together. This was also the case when, after the accident, we had to decide whether to end it permanently and even when I agreed to the request to serve as director – because, after all, it was also a shared success, only this one was in a different dimension. But the kind of unity that was “Ili and I” survived.

We lived together for 55 years. And I can say for sure that we never had an ordinary life. After all, our life was the circus!

I have received more than one official recognition in my life: the Mari Jászai Award, Hungarian Artist of Merit, Knight’s Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary, the Golden Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary, the Pushkin Award I personally received from Russian president Vladimir Putin, but much more valuable to me than all of them is our Silver Clown Award from Monte Carlo! Because there we were, the two of us, Ili and me, and we were not a huge 15-member acrobatic team or a spectacular equestrian animal-training act or an attraction with elephants and tigers. The two little acrobats from that little “communist” country made it into the large, international group of contenders and took a silver prize. It was such a surprise back then that we simply refused to believe it! Even today, I remember everything like it was yesterday...

Ili lost almost three kilos from nerves and rehearsals as we prepared for the festival. We agreed from the beginning that we were not concerned with the awards. What was more important for us was to give them our best and demonstrate everything we could do. Despite the great tension we were feeling, we never planned to go to the Monte Carlo International Circus Festival for our own sakes. We weren’t puppies anymore, the circus world knew us – I just add this to explain why we lacked the kind of motivation that makes a festival important. We had contracts signed: we were still working at Circus Scott, but already had plans to move on to Denmark the following

year to Cirkus Benneweis. And yes, this is a great distinction, because good productions are contracted in advance. So the directors of big circuses like Knie, Krone, Benneweis, Scott, and let's say Orfei, have a clear idea in advance about the artists' numbers on their shows, and the corresponding productions are booked at least a year, or a year and a half ahead of time. Since we also had a secure contract, we didn't think this festival could make such a big difference in our lives. However, we couldn't get out of it, because the MACIVA management had signed a contract for our presence in Monte Carlo. Of course, we knew that this performance was no small affair, because this was now the fourth Monte Carlo festival with an established eminence in our industry, so it was important to prepare and prepare well.

For us circus artists, the Monte Carlo International Circus Festival is just as prestigious an event as the Oscars is for actors. Getting here is a big deal, and if someone also wins an award, that is one of the highest accolades in the world of the circus.

The first festival in 1974 was just a start, an experiment, so to speak. And it succeeded. The French Bouglione Circus had contributed a tent and a show that wasn't long enough due to the paucity of performers, so they also contracted extra productions. Among those receiving invitations was Charlie Rivel, the world-famous Spanish clown who adopted his name in honour of his friend Charlie Chaplin and who ended up receiving the gold for best artist.

The second festival was much more extensive than the first, because the founder, Prince Rainier III of Monaco, felt that, indeed, there was an opportunity in this. God rest his soul, he created a most beautiful thing! With this, he actually launched the first event in the world of the circus that we could call a festival. It also attracted television networks – Italian, French and German – that paid good money for the broadcast rights. At that time, circus on televi-

sion were very popular. Prince Rainier reinvested all that revenue, which made the festival grow and grow. At the fourth festival in 1977 – the one in which we also participated – there were four complete shows! Four shows of 16 productions each, without repetition, meaning everyone only had one chance to appear before the jury and the audience. This has changed since: now there are only two shows, and if there's an elephant number, for example, it will be used in both shows: "A" and "B".

What has remained the same is the gala at the end. Then and now, this is a marvellous affair! At the fourth festival, the American television also got involved, so there was a huge budget available. All the performing artists were paid serious fees, so everyone wanted to take part in the competition. We received good money ourselves, even as artists from that "little communist country in Eastern Europe" who would be satisfied with crumbs. The others were star performers, and they were treated like stars. From America, for example, they brought Lou Jacobs, the most famous clown of all, and the Knie family performed with three tigers, three elephant numbers and a separate equestrian number. There were six teeterboard numbers, including the Silagis group, from Bulgaria. What they did in 1977 is still considered the best work ever done in the genre today!

We also had some competition, namely another Bulgarian team who did a Risley act. Some of their tricks were the same as what I was doing with Ili. The hype was enormous, with the artists arriving one after the other and giving interviews to the reporters. Of course, no one was even slightly interested in us. However, this didn't bother us in the least because Ili and I knew exactly what we were capable of. It was a wonderful festival! Four shows in three days, with over 60 productions featuring attractions unlike any that have been seen since! It was an amazing honour for

us to have our teeterboard brought to the stage by two fantastic people: Eduardo Murillo, the world-famous impresario responsible for arranging and signing the artists for the event, and Enis Togni Sr, the director of Circo Americano, Italy's largest circus who rented the tented facility to the principality.

They knew what it meant to do a small teeterboard number right after an equestrian act. They took care to arrange for the sawdust on the floor to be raked for us after the horses, and then they set up our teeterboard so that it wouldn't rock. The day before the performances, we only got 15 minutes to rehearse. While we went on in the same sequence as the show, unfortunately we had Fredy Knie Sr with his horses in front of us, and their practice session dragged on considerably. If I remember right, we were booked for ten in the evening, but it was almost midnight by the time our turn finally came, and our original quarter hour was reduced to just ten minutes.

In this anxious, urgent situation, we were extremely lucky that the band already knew us and the music they had to play for us. Otherwise, nobody troubled us with too many questions about how we wanted the lights set up: no one was curious about our opinion. They did it the way the cameraman from the television network demanded. Our productions were split up, meaning we worked with the teeterboard in the second show and the perch in the fourth. So I couldn't say the conditions were the most ideal, because we had torrential rain as well, and water was pouring into the back of the stable tent that served as the dressing room.

I remember how terribly nervous I was! Although our appearance here would have no effect on our future contracts, we still knew that this festival could damage our reputation. Why? Because it was only possible to perform here once, and if something went wrong at this one single performance, they would have been justified in telling

us, "Well, the Kristófs are starting to show their age." I admit, behind the scenes, it was good to see that it wasn't just us who were struggling with the pressure. Fredy Knie Sr, who was performing ahead of us, was also pacing up and down before going out. "Herr Freddie Knie, are you nervous?" Ili asked him, surprised that the owner and director of one of the most famous circuses in Europe was as tense as anyone else was. "Of course I'm nervous, madam," he replied, before resuming his pacing.

Ili told me before the performance, "Pityu, if I mess it up, you can divorce me!" This may sound silly, of course, but understanding the relationship between the two of us and knowing how many times she said, "Damn you! After all I did to make you marry me!", it should be clear that, coming from her, this was a very, very serious thing to say! My Ilike gave it her all; it simply worked beautifully. She jumped ever higher and more beautifully from one trick to the next! It was breathtaking!

After our last performance, it was around midnight before we sat down for supper. We had brought a beefsteak from Hungary, which Ili cooked with a mustard and brandy sauce. I remember we even drank some wine with it. As our caravan was parked close to the circus, we could hear sounds coming from outside. "I'm going out to see what's going on," I said, adding, "I'll be back soon." What happened next is something I will remember forever...

The noise was coming from the big-top, so I went in. The ring was full of our fellow circus artists. I looked around in amazement. People were puzzled at my reaction: "They're announcing the results now. Didn't you know?" I must not have arrived too late, because the prince then started revealing the names of the winners. At circus festivals, it is customary to rank the winning productions from last to first, starting with the special prizes and then moving on to the main prizes. Next to me was the French

Washington trapeze artist Gérard Edon, with whom we had worked previously at Cirkus Benneweis. If I remember correctly, he received a special award from Air France.

Then more results were announced. The names came one after the other: the Bulgarian teeterboard team, the Polish teeterboard group, and I just felt my stomach tie up in knots. It wasn't excitement. It was nervousness. I kept tell myself that it's okay if we don't get anything, but somewhere deep down I knew that it would still hurt a lot. When they started listing the main prizes, I began to feel something like "If this production got one, and that production got one, perhaps we might have a chance, too." But I didn't hear our names. I even thought about leaving, or standing at the edge of the tent, close to the exit. However, I was in the middle of a small group of colleagues whom I congratulated one by one. The silver winners were ranked one after the other, and when I heard the name of the French Antares group, I really felt like it was over, we weren't getting anything.

Then suddenly Prince Rainier said, "Istvan Kristóf, Hongrie! Hand voltige, Silverclown!"

My colleagues pounded my back in congratulations. What a fantastic moment! After us, the Bulgarian group Silagis took the first silver, and the Knie family received the single Golden Clown. I went back to the caravan to tell the wonderful news to Ili, who still had no idea what had happened.

"So? What was going on?" she asked.

"Silver clown!" I answered.

"Come on! Don't fool around with me like that!" And then she sat down on the bed, because suddenly the entire world had shifted around us. The "little Eastern European artists" had won a major award in the West. At the end of the festival, at the award gala

performance, the world-famous actor Cary Grant presented us with the Silver Clown Award. And I can report that Ili was greatly delighted, as a bonus, to also enjoy a kiss on the cheeks from him.

A Silver Clown! I believe my son is proud as well that his mother and father achieved something like this!

A SUDDEN ACCIDENT

Ili was never afraid of heights. Honestly, we didn't think about fear, we didn't even talk about it. Not even when we had a minor accident in 1967 and Ili fell off the shoulder held perch. At the top of the pole, there is a loop strap into which the artist inserts her wrist, ankle or neck. Then, before starting her trick, she secures her position with a safety ring. At that time, if the loop strap was short, many artists simply crossed their ankles and dispensed with the safety ring. They were of the opinion that this method also provided enough protection. We liked this technique too, so this is the way Ili did it. Except that the material in the loop strap stretched out a bit (becoming too long), and when I started to swing Ili on the perch, her foot simply slipped out and she plummeted to the floor face and stomach down. At that moment, maybe my past as an aerialist and my catching routine helped me, because I reacted instinctively during the fall: I threw away the perch and caught Ili. She fell nine and a half metres, but didn't suffer any significant harm, and after three days we were working again. If you are an aerialist, you have to be aware that you may fall at any time. We know that what we are doing is dangerous, but this fact is not constantly going through our minds. We can do the stunt a thousand times flawlessly, and then on the thousand-and-first attempt find ourselves in trouble. And this one time can always occur, no matter how professional the acrobat is.

This trouble came on 20 March 1987, in West Germany. A sudden accident. The kind of accident that can always occur, even though it shouldn't. We were in Göttingen with the German Renz Circus,

two days before the premiere. We were rehearsing the trick where Ili rotates around the top of the perch from her neck. And right then the electricity suddenly went out. The power had gone out before in other places. For example, in Italy. Except there they had a backup generator, so there was still enough light for Ili to slide down the perch safely. For safety reasons, circuses usually split up their lighting sources. This way, if the main current is suddenly cut off, then you still have the second, the generator or a 12V battery light system, in reserve in case of an emergency. When our accident happened, the trouble was that the generator producing the electricity had been taken away from the circus for repairs, so it wasn't working, and only the municipal electricity source remained. Except right at that moment the electricity provider was installing something that cut off the main power to the circus, and so it suddenly went dark.

As I mentioned earlier, when we work with the perch, in order to keep it balanced, I need a point above me that I can look at and relate to. But I can't see anything in the dark. I was helpless. There was nothing we could do. Nothing. I remember the way I clung to the perch. I wanted to hold on, keep it upright at all costs, but it just tilted over and took me with it... It was hopeless to try to hold it... I only heard the thud... Someone ran in with a torch, and the moment I saw my wife lying on the floor, I thought she was dead.

But Ili survived the fall. She had suffered a serious head injury, but she was alive! The ambulance arrived within minutes and immediately took my unconscious wife to hospital.

I berated myself for a long time for what happened. Maybe if I hadn't taken two steps to keep my balance, maybe if I had stayed in the middle of the ring, then maybe the pole would have tilted so that my wife would have fallen inside the ring rather than on the barrier at its edge. There were too many "maybes". Except there,

at that moment, I didn't have time to think or consider anything. The accident was inevitable, and I know it wasn't up to me. It was not my fault. Did I blame someone? Yes. Because the electricity shouldn't have gone off in the circus. There was an official investigation, which turned into a court hearing: the circus director was found responsible for serious injury caused by negligence.

Ili was admitted to the intensive care unit after the surgeries. I can only bless the doctor who operated on her. I even remember his name: it was Kollmann. "I don't know how much free time you have, but you can stay here now. If she regains consciousness, it would be good if you are the first one she sees," the doctor said. He was a fantastic man. He gave me his surgical gown and even offered me the bed in his room so I could be in the hospital next to my wife. And I stayed beside her there all along. Was our relationship strengthened by the accident? I do not think that there exists a stronger bond than the one we already had between us before. I didn't fall even more in love with her, and I didn't lose faith in her either. We were the same as we used to be when we had a good fight because she beat me at cards. We were always together. It's simply amazing what they did to heal my wife in Germany. If the accident hadn't happened in Göttingen but instead in another city, Ili might have remained confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life, because her head was cracked open like an egg. Working in Göttingen at the time were super doctors with access to the most modern technology of the time, and Ili owed her recovery to them. Ili spent about two weeks at the University of Göttingen Clinic before being taken to a rehabilitation facility with a specific focus on treating head injuries.

Thanks to the therapy, her condition improved dramatically from day to day. The doctor even allowed us to start practising, of course strictly on the condition that she refrain from doing headstands for

the time being. We still had hopes for returning to the ring, since Ili was on course to getting better. We got use of the institute's gym from 5 pm. They even put together a special diet for her, as I told the doctor that my wife was gaining weight, which wasn't good, as she was an acrobat. Oh, how my poor Ilike scolded me for that! Four and a half months after the accident, we said farewell to the institute. They said that this was as much as they could do to rehabilitate Ili, but we should be patient, because we still had to wait at least a year and a half or even two years for the final recovery. Whatever does not heal during this much time will remain as it is permanently. Ili's sense of smell never returned, but thank goodness, no other symptoms remained.

After we returned home to Budapest, I went to the neurosurgery clinic on Amerikai Street with the German medical records and their recommendations for further rehabilitation. "When you bring in your wife tomorrow, you can bring her in her wheelchair through the other door," the new attending physician said. "We don't have a wheelchair here, Professor. We're coming to you so that we can perform again!" I replied. But he could hardly believe what he had heard. He stared at me with wide eyes. "What? Isn't your wife in a wheelchair after an injury like this?"

The accident had occurred in March. Eight months later, in November, we were already practising our teeterboard tricks. It never occurred to us to stop; we wanted to get back in the ring. "The accident happened. There's nothing we can do about it. Let's go practise. Let's keep moving on!" That's how our thinking went. Ili climbed the perch and did a handstand. I had to tell her to fasten the safety rope, whereupon she gave me a look: "The lunge belt? Why?" I had to lie to her. "I haven't held up a perch in a long time. Let's be careful in case my neck cracks," I said, because Ili wasn't as scared as I was, even after the accident! We were yearning to per-

form again with all our hearts. We were preparing because we had a written contract to work in the Netherlands for the winter. We would have gone together, bringing Kristian with us, from December until mid-February. Ili's doctor was the best neurosurgeon in Hungary, and we visited him regularly for check-ups. The doctor was aware that we were acrobats and that we do stunts, so he didn't beat around the bush: he asked us to stop working, because despite Ili's recovery, it would be highly risky for her to continue working in the air.

We didn't want to give up right away. We started thinking about how to get back somehow anyway. We figured out which tricks could be omitted, and then we talked about reducing the two numbers into one number. But we had a reputation in the profession and worked in the top circuses in Europe. And there was our Silver Clown from Monte Carlo! With so much success behind us, returning to the stage with a production that wasn't even half of what we were able to do before? Both of us felt that this wouldn't be such a good thing either. We didn't want to get a contract merely out of pity after all that. "Pityu, what's the point of this?" Ili asked. "We were somebodies, and now we are supposed to be a quarter of what we were? Let's end this!"

Then we started to think about what we could do instead.

I've always liked seals, so I suggested that we could possibly do a production involving them. Yes, we could have, but animal numbers are very expensive, especially seals, as they require at least one lorry with a pool and refrigeration equipment. We planned it out, talked about it, but in the end it didn't go anywhere.

An era in our lives was over, and only circus people can know how difficult this decision was for us. Perhaps the hardest part of an artist's life. And in those days, we didn't even suspect that a whole new chapter was about to begin in our lives, both personally and professionally.



Ili rotating on the perch, Capital Circus (1978)



On the teeterboard with Ili, Liana, Nando & Rinaldo Orfei Circus (1966)



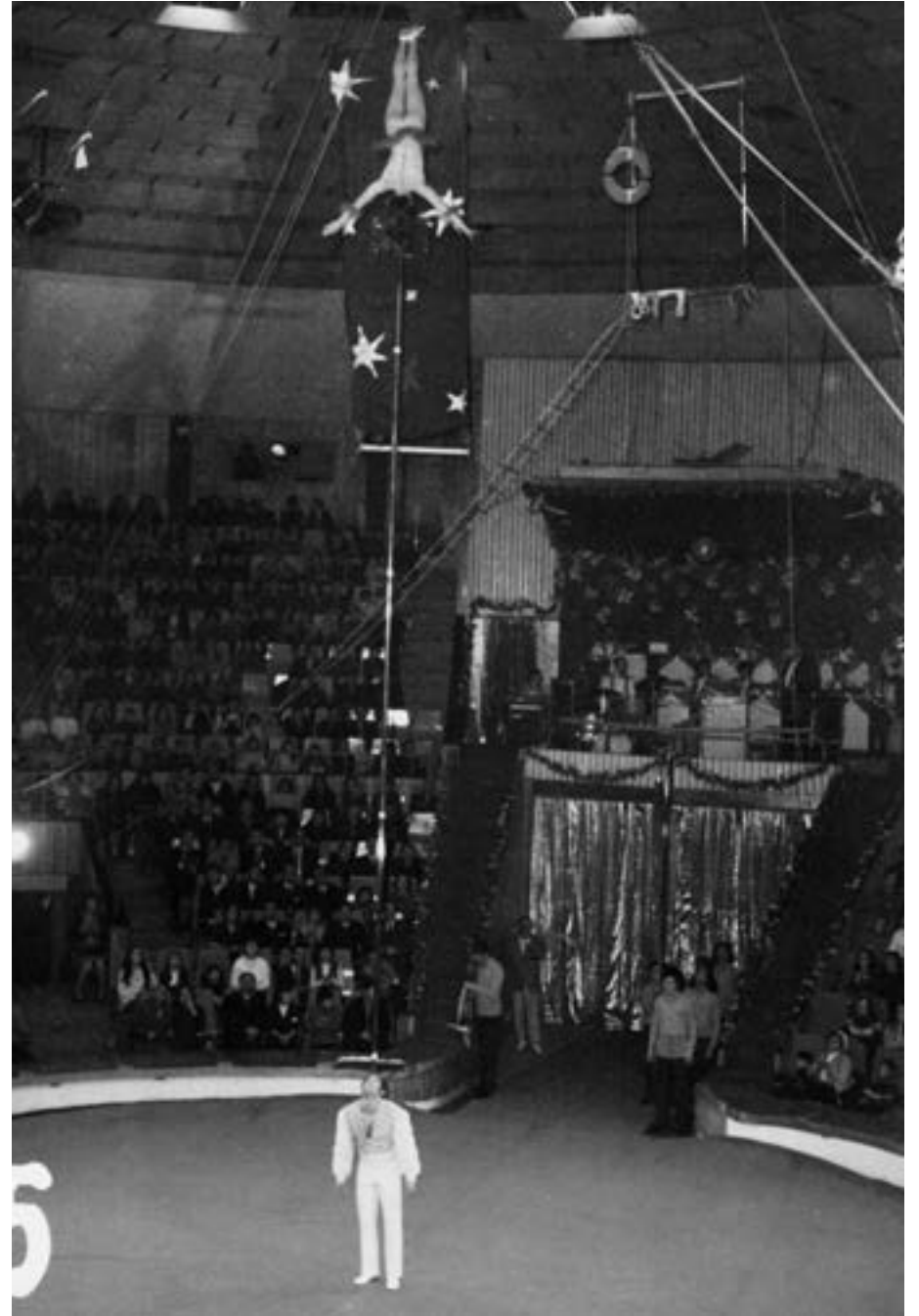
The Three Sallais, Capital Circus (1953)



Ilike (1958)



Our wedding (1963)



Candlestick handstand on the perch, Capital Circus (1978)



Three Generations – Capital Circus Gala – Ili, my father and myself (1985)



Finale of the Fourth Monte Carlo International Circus Festival (1977)



One-handed landing from the teeterboard, Circus Krone (1978)



CHAPTER
THREE

FOR ME, THE CAPITAL CIRCUS OF BUDAPEST IS A SHRINE

I have always had a very close relationship with the Capital Circus. I could even say that I grew up on the circus grounds, because even my childhood memories are linked to the building. For example, when my father was performing there, I fought battles with rats in its yard as a small child. I also recall when my sister Panni and I were featured in an advert when we were little, being photographed as passengers in a pony-drawn carriage in the zoo. Driving the carriage was the son of the circus caretaker of the time, so we got the chance to be models, so to speak, attracting the crowds. Years later, as a young acrobat, there was nothing I longed for more than to perform in this ring. This wish was also fulfilled, as my career practically started from here, on 1 May 1960, as I mentioned earlier. Later on, we held our wedding here too. However, I never dreamed that I would end up as the circus director one day!

After Ili suffered her accident and we made the final decision to stop working as acrobats, I received an offer from Imre Budai, who was still then director of MACIVA. “You have three options,” he said, “you can choose to head the international department or art department at MACIVA, or you can be the director of the Capital Circus.” Budai assured me that my wife would have a position next to me as well, because he knew that the two of us were inseparable. I didn’t accept any of his offers right away. I asked for time, and eventually Ili and I made the decision together.

Why did I think I would be capable of running the Capital Circus? Because it didn’t really entail anything new, since I had grown up in a circus, among artists and animals. It’s true that this building

is bigger and much more permanent than a tent, but at least one doesn’t have to be so nervous when a storm rolls in. We were always worried about the tent in the wind and rain. I also had management experience, as I was put in charge of tours on several occasions. Despite all this, it was still one of the most difficult moments of my life when I was appointed director. I remember the artists sitting in the auditorium of the Capital Circus at the ceremony, and in the middle of the ring, sitting at a table for the “bigwigs”, were Budai, the representatives of the MACIVA union and the party secretary. According to the plan, I was to enter from behind and head to the front of the ring. As I walked, what I felt was, “I’m alone!” Until that moment, I had never entered that ring before without either Panni, the Hunor group or Ili together with me. This is what I was used to: “being together” had become a part of my life. And now she wasn’t there because she was sitting in the auditorium. Who the hell would have thought it would be so hard! I only became aware of this feeling when the curtain opened and I was standing there, all by myself.

Of course, the two of us remained a unit in everyday life, as Ili worked with me, and we were able to stay part of the circus world. When I took up the position of director, I didn’t think that everything that happened at the Capital Circus up to that point was negative and was now going to be super from then on. How could I have thought such a thing, since the institution I was now taking over was a mature and long-operating circus that, despite the change of director, continued to function as it did before, with the same staff?

For me, the Capital Circus of Budapest is a shrine.

From my first day as director, I worked with Ili to preserve the international reputation of Hungarian circus art. Just like during our acrobatic career, we wanted to make the most out of ourselves in this position. While we were no longer going into the ring for a

five-minute number ourselves, I was the one who submitted the entire two-hour programme, and therefore there could be no errors in it: the music had to play when it had to play, and the lighting needed to change at the right time! If any kind of problem ever cropped up, I never registered it as, say, the lighting technician's fault. Instead, I felt that it was a shared error, and I blamed myself for not paying closer attention! I took part in all the work. Frequently I was the one who went to the eastern border of Hungary to pick up animals being shipped from Russia for use in the shows, even though we had somebody to take care of this. I went myself in order to make sure there wouldn't be any trouble with the paperwork. Indeed, it was often a good thing that I was there, because that way the animals were always certain to arrive on time.

When a person grows up in a circus, works as a circus artist and eventually gets into a management position, he still remains a circus person deep inside. That is, he watches the circus workers quite differently than others would. I couldn't be fooled. Let me give you an example. When I had to set up a net for the aerial production, I could immediately see which of the stagehands was a slacker, because he was standing by the "cross". This is because this is where the least installation work is needed. Nobody could talk their way out of such situations. I immediately noticed this employee's attitude to work from where he was standing when there was a job like this to do. Of course, even so, there were attempts made to fool me.

Once an acrobat came up to me and complained that he had sprained his ankle, so he wouldn't be able to perform three times a day, only once. "That's not the way it works!" I told him, "I was an acrobat too, so I know exactly what can be done and what cannot be done. I know that if something hurts, it's even worse at work. However, if you can do one show, you can do the others too. Or don't work at all!"

I also remember another episode when a perch acrobat tried to explain to me at the very beginning that he couldn't take on three performances a day, because his neck couldn't take it. "See this?" I said, showing him a photo of "Duo Kristof" doing our perch act. "Yes, that's me, the one supporting the pole on my forehead!" Well, he immediately changed his mind and didn't try to make any more excuses. Sometimes I even had to enlighten the Russians not to mistake me for a South American businessman who will buy anything. I am reminded now of the water circus tour where there was a problem with the animals. There were reptiles – snakes and crocodiles – in the show, and the trainer was already convinced as to how much we needed to pay for her to bring the animals. "Leave them in Russia, and I'll buy or rent other ones in their place," I advised her. But she wouldn't quit, saying it wasn't a good idea, because then she would have to train the new reptiles. "Jana," I asked her, "how are you going to train a snake?" Because I knew perfectly well that reptiles can't be taught. You can't explain to them, "Swim this way or that way now," and no matter how many times you call them to come over to you, they won't come. With crocodiles, you simply have to muzzle their jaws so they can't bite you. Snakes don't harm anyone. This is how you work with them.

As artists, we also noticed if someone's "performance shoes" were faded and worn out. Then we would give the artist a spray can to paint them before stepping out in the ring, because we don't go in front of the audience looking grubby or tattered. Anyway, a person with little knowledge of the circus – "outsiders", as we call them – wouldn't notice this. Even if the outsider is appointed director by the ministry.

I always treated the Capital Circus as if it were my own. Together with the technical staff, I oversaw everything to make sure it was in

order. Every two weeks, I went up to the ceiling under the dome to check that there was no wear and tear on the bindings anywhere. I only left the place for short periods when I travelled abroad, which was always for some circus-related affair. "Take even better care of the building than when I'm here!" I told my staff before departing, and I knew everything would be fine. I could feel perfectly secure, since Ili was there in my absence. Behind her back, they called her "the woman with three eyes": two regular ones and a third in the back of her head, and there was almost nothing she failed to notice. There was discipline at the circus. However, when necessary, I could also be forgiving. Once on a day when we were putting on three performances, for example, I noticed that one of the stagehands was making frequent trips next door (where there was a pub at the time). By the end of the second show, he appeared to be quite inebriated. I gave him two thousand forints and said, "Go back to the pub and drink as much as you can with this money. Then go home and sleep it off. We'll talk tomorrow." Why did I do this? Because in the world of travelling circuses, I learnt that such problems are not infrequent among technical staff. However, the people who set up the tent are greatly needed, because they are the ones who pack the wagons at night and, if necessary, lead a frightened horse on foot from the station to the circus. In our time, their lot was even harder because they lacked any luxuries in their six-square-metre caravans: they didn't even have lighting. Some of them turned to alcohol as a form of "relaxation", and often got drunk. If the director sacks people for this, who is going to pound in the stakes tomorrow? Who will put up the tent? I thought I would be better off telling that person to "go home, relax and we'll talk tomorrow." Of course, the ensuing conversation was also to inform him that he would in fact be sacked if this happened again. I had one stagehand with whom I had to talk every two years during my 24-year tenure.

We have to acknowledge that everyone has their own faults. The circus world is no different. Because I've spent my entire life among circus artists, I grew up with the attitude that we need to care for and protect the circus. As director, when I noticed that a sign on the wall was a little crooked, I told the person in charge and didn't wait for someone else to detect it.

I would hand the older ladies who served as ushers a dusting cloth to tidy up their own area in the auditorium half an hour before the performance, wiping the armrests of the chairs as well. I asked them to keep their eyes open and, if they noticed anything, such as a seat not closing properly, to tell the auditorium supervisor so that he could report the problem to the technical manager. And yes, I often went in to check to see that the seats were free of dust. My God, what an ordeal it had been to replace those seats with new ones: we were forced to save up a lot of our money for it!

At the time, we had to think carefully about how we were spending our funds, so we hired older ladies to work as ushers, which they could do while also collecting a pension. We watched their work to see how they escorted guests to their seats and what they did when a mum got up during the performance to take her child to the toilet. If we noticed that one of them was behaving irritably or rudely toward the viewers, we dismissed them.

We had to pay attention to everything, even the band, because the audience was invariably coming to see just that one show, meaning there was no room for relaxation: they had to work to make each performance perfect. In their defence, life is not at all easy for circus musicians, as playing the same set for 250 performances over the course of five months can get rather tiresome for them. Later, as the world evolved, I also had video technology to help me. We placed cameras around the circus, and I was able to monitor whether everything was in order from my office. (Naturally, the staff

knew about the cameras.) It was better this way, because everyone made sure to be on their best behaviour, and I no longer had to tell the stagehands things like “Don’t scratch your nose while you’re waiting in the ring!” These are complex issues. Today I might say that perhaps we didn’t need to have been so vigilant. Maybe not. However, this was the only way we could work, because it was important for the Capital Circus to function properly!

I didn’t have working hours. It didn’t matter if it was one of our days off – in our time it was Monday and Tuesday – because I was still there, just like on our Saturday and Sunday performance days. The office would be empty because everyone was out for the weekend, but I thought it was important to have someone there anyway. When necessary, on pay days, I served as an interpreter to help the financial manager and the cashiers to communicate with foreign artists. I was even there whenever someone was injured and had to be accompanied to a doctor. Then, if the situation required, I followed the ambulance to the hospital in my car as well so I could continue to help with any interpretation that was needed. I knew exactly how important this was, because when I needed to visit a doctor abroad as an artist because of my back problems, I was always accompanied by someone from the local circus. I would also be among the first to learn when an unwanted pregnancy accidentally slipped through. The female artist in question would tell me, because she needed help. It’s strange that things like this happen at the circus, right? But that’s life.

The question may arise as to why I was the one who did all this. The answer is very simple. There was so little money at the Capital Circus at the time that we couldn’t employ many people. Especially for such extraordinary situations. So when help was needed, there we were, Ili and me. In truth, this was also part of the international reputation of the Capital Circus at the time

– the special care we gave our visiting artists. I still remember a few special cases. The second time he came to appear with us, a Russian illusionist named “Kukes” brought his wife with him, and she became ill. I took her to the Honvéd Hospital, and since she didn’t speak any languages other than her own, I stayed with her the whole time and interpreted during the examinations. At the end, she laughed and said, “Pityu, now you know more about me than my husband does!”

On another occasion when I accompanied another female artist to the hospital, I almost got ill. What you need to know to understand the story is the fact that I can’t stand to see someone bleeding. The sight of it makes me sick. What happened is that the world-famous animal trainer Lyudmila Shevchenko, whom we just called Luda, was presenting two animal acts in Budapest together with her husband. In one she worked with tigers, and in the other with smaller, but still potentially dangerous, animals. The premiere went down nicely, but an accident occurred before the Saturday morning performance: Luda bungled feeding a biscuit to a bear, and the creature accidentally bit off one of her fingers almost entirely. Blood gushed out, so we called an ambulance and headed to the trauma hospital. Since Luda’s husband had to stay for the next show – we couldn’t skip the animal act under any circumstance, as it was featured in the advertising for the show – I went to the hospital with her. The doctor looked at me and asked, “What shall we do with the finger? We can try to sew it back on, but there is a 99% chance that it will fester in spite of every treatment, and we’ll end up having to cut it off anyway.” I translated everything for Luda. “Go ahead and cut it off,” she told the doctor, “I have ten of them anyway!” One tough gal she was! They commenced this minor surgical procedure, and I remained with her to continue to interpret. Except I went pale at the sight of the blood. “Calm down, Pityu,” said Luda, “It’s no

problem. Sit down!” The poor thing was worried about me as they were operating on her hand! Except for this one incident, no major accidents occurred under my watch, thank God. Smaller ones did happen, but even then, there is no stopping: the show must go on. If the artist can limp out of the ring on his own, he does it, and that’s the end of it. That’s why the next performer has to be waiting backstage behind the curtain and ready to go an act earlier.

Another option is to have the clowns jump in to help distract the audience. The second-to-last dressing room along the ground floor corridor, number seven, belonged to the clowns. This was in part because they had to do the most work in the dressing room to prepare for the many different “reprise” interlude appearances during the course of the show, and also in part so that if anything extraordinary happened, they would be as close to the ring as possible and able to take the stage at any moment of the performance!

Hosting animal numbers meant that we were often visited by various inspectors. One such occasion remains very memorable to me. What happened is I had received notification that an animal welfare committee was coming to visit us from abroad. Being featured at the Capital Circus at that time were the famous Austrian animal trainer Theodor Streicher and his family, with their chimpanzees. When I informed them that we were expecting official guests, they simply said that if the delegation happened to arrive at lunchtime, then I should escort them to take a look at their caravan.

When I brought the three visiting ladies there, their jaws dropped, and they were speechless with astonishment: one of the chimpanzees was seated at the dining table, where with “human” dignity and dexterity, it was unsealing the aluminium foil top of a container of kefir before beginning to spoon out the delicious treat with elegance and pleasure. In actual fact, there was nothing remarkable about this, as the Streichers’ chimpanzees were also

family members. The other reason I love this story is because it is a perfect example of how the relationships between circus people and their animals goes far beyond what is imagined in the public consciousness.

I always slept well at night as director. Even when I was loaded with problems. (Which is to say, even now when I’m very anxious about something, it still won’t keep me from sleeping.) I only say this because we had a lot of problems. What kind of problems? For example, when Ili and I took over the circus, we still had a dance ensemble, and the female dancers got their stockings from the circus. These stockings tore very easily, but we didn’t have any money to purchase more, so Ili had to get out her needle and thread to repair them. There is no way to make this sound nicer. Those are the times we lived in: the director’s wife had to sew the dancing girls’ stockings because the director couldn’t buy new ones.

We also constantly struggled with the lack of space, because we couldn’t store large quantities of feed. However, our programmes sometimes included several “animal performers” at the same time, which called for as much as 25-30 bales of hay a day. It was a bit of a challenge, but we solved that too. We were able to store what we needed in a hangar at the Cinkota site and kept a maximum of two days’ supply at the circus itself. Sometimes we also had problems procuring the right kinds of fruits or vegetables needed to feed the animals to the required standard. Today, of course, I laugh when I recall these memories, even though there were serious quarrels at the time over the fact that Hungary produced no fresh strawberries during the winter, no matter how much the bears needed them. All we could do was try to plan well in advance, so we already knew in March what we would have on our programme next winter and the following summer, thus giving our procurement manager, Gábor Németh, the opportunity to buy everything we needed in time. We

saved a lot of money by doing this, because if Gábor could make an arrangement with the supplier well ahead of time, he could lock down the hay at a decent price, whereas we would have paid double if we had waited until September or October.

Of course, I don't mean to say that a circus director encounters a problem every day of the year. Not at all! There were times when everything was smooth sailing. Then, all I had to do was take an occasional look at the performances, do a round or two of checks, and when I found that everything was in working order, I was as calm as could be. Nothing must ever escape the director's eyes.

When I took over the Capital Circus, we were as poor as church mice. There was no question about making long-term plans at that time. It would not have occurred to us to try. All we knew was that we had to put on a show, and the only funds we had came from the revenues for the tickets we sold. The only objective we set was to survive somehow.

I was appointed circus director on 1 April 1988. In 1989 came the regime change. Budai, the director of MACIVA, resigned and left. What was to follow was an era of the greatest imaginable chaos.

You've got the circus. Don't let them close it down on your watch! - this is the thought that haunted me throughout my 24 years as director. As the head of the Capital Circus of Budapest, my task was to pay for all the expenses of our artistic programme – costs for the travel and upkeep of the artists, props and animal acts, as well as the advertising spent on the programme – from ticket revenues. All we could pay for from the state subsidy were the wages and social security contributions of the in-house employees and the utility bills. This was no small task!

In addition, making my work even more difficult in the initial period was the fact that Hungarian artists did not consider it so important to work at the Capital Circus. I was glad whenever the Kisfaludy group came to perform for us, for example. If they said that the flyer had a sprained ankle and couldn't work, nothing would happen to them, as they would still collect a regular salary due to their "artist status", meaning they received the same amount regardless of whether they performed or not. At that time, the lives of the artists were easier in the sense that our employer, MACIVA, gave them the status and a steady monthly salary, that is, a stable livelihood. Of course, not everyone benefitted from this, as while some earned a living by doing less work, the better artists had a lot of cash deducted from their fees for their performances abroad, as they worked more and were constantly on contract. The way it worked in practice was that only MACIVA could sign a contract for them. For example, if it sold an artist for 250 West German marks, then the company had to calculate the artist's salary and

its implications in forints: this was what we called “the calculation”. The pre-determined percentage of the state-imposed “second-class daily allowance” is what the artist would get in the end. This was about 25-30 marks out of the original 250. If the artist had a caravan and a car, he even got extra housing money, which was 20% of the pre-calculated “hotel cost”. That is, most of the money the artist earned remained with MACIVA. This was a considerable amount in the ’70s, when the Hungarian state was, so to speak, “hungry for hard currency.” MACIVA was able to sell the currency it received from the artists’ work abroad to the Hungarian National Bank at a significant premium.

We often had problems with “the calculation”. For example, if the fees offered by a small English circus didn’t exceed the artist’s salary and legally stipulated daily allowance, according to the preliminary figures, this was a bad deal for MACIVA, and they wouldn’t want to let the artist go. If, for some reason, the company nevertheless still signed the contract, it was surely at a loss for them, even though MACIVA had to pay close attention to its revenues. However, since every artist longed to travel abroad and work in other countries, this caused constant debate in the office.

While I’m on the subject, I should mention the “point system”. This meant that in addition to the basic monthly salary, the artists received a “point” after each performance. These “points” were collected, and after a certain score was reached, one received a bonus. Of course, this score was quite high: 200 or 250, numbers that were not very possible to achieve working at home in Hungary. Due to all this, after a while, artists no longer felt any incentive to develop themselves further, and there instead evolved a culture in which the artists’ thinking was, “Nobody in the West is going to pay for me to go there anyway, but no problem, because MACIVA will still send me somewhere in Eastern Europe, and this

old costume of mine will be just fine there too!” They were simply not motivated to progress further. We took over the Soviet experience, except not in the way we should have done, meaning that we did it a little bit stupidly. One of the big differences was that while in Russia artists were paid by the performance, we were paid by working days. The other is that the Russians also paid different artists different fees: while one artist received ten rubles for a performance, another might receive a hundred rubles, or ten times as much. For us Hungarians, however, everyone received the same daily allowance, with the animal keeper and the star artist both getting almost the exact same amount. (The extent of the differentiation was such that the lowest salary was HUF 1,750, and the highest was HUF 3,000. I know this because I received the latter amount. However, as an artist, I earned only HUF 1,250 more per month than the animal keeper, who did not work in the ring.) Incidentally, the basic contracts also stated that the artist had to go anywhere that MACIVA sent them. Understandably, everyone was happy to work abroad, because the daily allowance was important despite the deductions; we could live off it, and if you were careful, you could even bring some of it home.

In fact, if you came across a multi-year contract, then returning home, the artist could even buy a flat from his foreign earnings. It was a great motivating factor to know that, if you were good, you might even end up in West Germany. But not everyone was sent abroad. It was only possible to sell acts to the socialist countries as part of an “exchange programme”, so to speak, which in practice looked like this: if a Russian company of 30 people came here, a Hungarian team of 30 people would take their place there. However, it was not possible to sell to the West even then, because the circus directors there chose the productions carefully and did not buy just anything. You couldn’t tell the Krone, Knie, or Ben-

newer circuses, “Here, you can take this,” because the directors themselves decided what they needed. Only a few of us Hungarian artists were offered contracts, but one that they always wanted to take was “Duo Kristof”. There were a lot of conflicts over this, because of course, if someone’s contract didn’t work out, then everyone from the head of the art department to the international division was at fault. “I’m a quality production, and they can’t sell me anywhere?” was what many of the artists would say, and this mentality unfortunately continues to this day. I just don’t understand why so many people don’t realise, even after all these years, that it is the one with the money who decides what to buy. I’ve always said that, as circus artists, we’re like the vendors in the market who put their merchandise out on display. The customer chooses from them and, if he does not like the goods, he can decide to shop elsewhere. And I can’t tell him, “For God’s sake, buy my goods!” Because I can’t force him to.

In any case, we couldn’t do a single thing without MACIVA. Partly because, under the laws of the time, circus artists could only travel abroad if they were authorised to do so in their passports. We called this authorisation a “window”: it was actually a rectangular stamp with the dates of the permitted absence abroad written in it. These could not be obtained “privately”, so to speak. Only the company could officially arrange it through its relations with the Ministry of the Interior.

I had a lot of struggles with MACIVA and never, for a moment, was I deterred from the conflicts by the fact that I was facing a large company with an artistic department, show directors and international agents. Initially, they had an entire floor at No. 10 Bátor Street, near the Parliament. At one time, before my tenure as director but when I was serving as the president of the circus artists’ union, I had a better idea of what was going on, I still didn’t

understand what the company was spending its state support on and why they weren’t giving some of it to the artists. Later, during my 24 years as director, I constantly felt that even though we had a supervisory body, no one was responsible for the problems. It didn’t matter that I was the head of the circus, I still never saw the budget, and I didn’t even know how much it cost to operate the Capital Circus on a daily basis. I knew how much the shows cost, and I even knew the salaries of the workers, and I was able to calculate the utility costs based on the invoices, but I never got a full picture from the company. The fact was, however, that it was only the Capital Circus that brought in revenue, everything else just absorbed the money.

It was no secret that, as director, I longed to break away from MACIVA. I wanted us to be independent of the controlling company. Yes, even though this would have meant the end of the company, as it would have been left without a real function. This was the crisis that started with the regime change in ’89. In the end, unfortunately, my plan failed, so our disagreements with László Varjasi, the director of MACIVA at the time, were never resolved. We had serious conflicts of interest over the years, and we even became competitors at times. This was felt most strongly when they wanted to bring Italy’s world-famous Medrano Circus to Felvonulási (Parade) Square.

This was important to the company because they knew it would bring in revenue. “Then I’m going to go to the appropriate municipal office now to torpedo this thing!” I told Varjasi, because I simply could not let the two great circuses operate so close to each other, as I knew very well that the world-famous Medrano would have taken spectators away from us, the Capital Circus, which was already in a difficult situation. My efforts were successful, the Italian circus did not get Felvonulási Square in the end; instead they

were placed further away, at the small “Kisstadion” near the current stadium complex south of the park. I knew the Italian circus had excellent productions, with a giraffe, a seal and five elephants, so I also needed impressive acts to draw more viewers to come and see us. So I travelled all the way to Russia for the ice circus!

Thanks to my earlier artistic career, I was on very good terms with the Russian director, who offered to let us select a show’s worth of acts from the two productions they were running at the time. We were very short on funds, but with the little money that was available to me, I was able to put together an ice circus show such as has never been seen at the Capital Circus either before or since. It had everything, from a teeterboard number to bears playing ice hockey! I needed that ice circus. It was a lifesaver, “a raft in the storm”, so to speak! I wasn’t mistaken in my thinking, because the production was so successful that all our tickets sold out for the Easter period of 1992: the Capital Circus was jam packed! (Meanwhile, the Medrano attracted so few visitors that even though they had rented the venue for a month, they ended up going home after two weeks.)

My financial struggles were almost constant. I felt that if we didn’t operate properly, we’d be shut down. I’ve never concerned myself with politics, and I don’t care what kind of government is in power right now, either. On the other hand, I felt – in fact, I knew – that the Capital Circus was not of the slightest importance to the leadership of the time. In fact, they wanted to raze it to the ground so that they could return the land to the zoo. I had to figure something out, because I was very much aware that this was the last chance to keep our beautiful circus going!

We tried all kinds of things. We went to the ministry and told them that we needed more money, as the annual subsidy wasn’t enough to do much of anything, as inflation was hitting the forint hard.

“You want state support? Be glad you get this much, because there is no subsidy written into the budget for you at all. We help out the Capital Circus with whatever money is left, so be happy to get what you get!” said the responsible state secretary of the day. It was then that I was confronted with the fact that we were really just a mosquito buzzing around the ears of the leaders of the country.

When the privatisation phase started and the Hungarian state was selling off all its assets, different ideas emerged regarding the fate of the Capital Circus. Some wanted to convert the building into a casino. Even the idea of selling the building came up as an option, but I protested against this tooth and nail. The whole thing looked so bad that a ministerial commissioner was sent to MACIVA.

The head of MACIVA was suspended of virtually all his rights with respect to the circus, and only I was left with the right to sign documents on its behalf. And the ministerial commissioner oversaw everything. She was with us for six months, and while she was doing the job, we thoroughly “subverted” her with the true magic of the circus.

Let’s just say this is no wonder, since anyone who came over and stayed with us for a little bit quickly developed a different view of this world. The ministerial commissioner had never been to a circus before, either, but we could feel her growing to like us during her time with us. This was obviously partly also since, after seeing our books, it became clear to her that none of us were stealing or wasting money, but that everyone was working twice as much as they should have been. “You know, István, there were discussions in our office about shutting down the circus,” she told me movingly as we said farewell. “But no one dared to take this step. They were waiting to see if it would close on its own. But you didn’t let it!” My innermost self has always struggled not to have to beg, and never to be dependent on whether the competent ministry gave us

money or not. The problem, incidentally, started after the regime change, when various new taxation measures were introduced that led to average Hungarians having much less disposable income than they were used to, which led to a sharp decline in the number of ticket buyers, as well as in our revenues.

Crucial to our survival was the corporate tax credit programme, which allows companies to offset their tax liabilities with payments to an approved list of sports and cultural institutions. I make no secret of the fact that I detected the possibility of a guardian angel in this. There had been two discussions in the Prime Minister's Office on this matter. There we were: Hungary's various theatre directors and me, representing the circus. (Meaning not MACIVA, but rather the Capital Circus of Budapest!) I put all my energy into fighting to have us registered and accepted into this tax credit scheme. We had already been rejected twice, but on those occasions, it was MACIVA's applications that had been turned down. Now I was attempting it alone, except as the Capital Circus, not as MACIVA. In the discussion, I argued that we operate in the same way as any other theatre, and more precisely, like a theatre without its own company, as we do not maintain a permanent roster of artists, but instead contract everyone individually and on a show-by-show basis. They nodded in assent. Later, this reasoning was described in detail in the proposed law. I had the feeling that they were afraid of private circuses, so they needed a pinpoint definition to exclude travelling circuses from the support.

The National Assembly approved the law.

I had to do everything I could for the Capital Circus, since for us circus artists, this is our National Theatre! Incidentally, there was a bigger and even more beautiful circus in Bulgaria. That one in Sofia has since completely burnt down and has not been replaced. "There's a small circus in Hungary," is what people said after the

war, and for a long time, no one cared about it, it was only quite slowly that the Capital Circus of Budapest started to enter the international public consciousness.

Despite the difficulties, we did our best, which meant that sometimes there were better, so-called "boom" periods. Thanks to these very successful and popular shows, we earned extra revenue, which allowed us to develop in small steps. Many people didn't even want to believe it could happen, the thought was so incredible in light of our financial situation. Through astute management of resources, we were able to replace the seats, although admittedly not all of them, because there was no money left for the first section. (I am sad to see that this state of affairs has remained unchanged since then; those seats still have not been replaced, just like some of the operational machinery, even though the circus now has twenty times as much money to spend as it did then.)

During my 24 years as director, I fought many battles. On several occasions, I seriously quarrelled with Miklós Persányi, the director of the zoo at the time. I remember when he came in with his staff and started drawing a line across the circus yard, saying, "This is the zoo's property on this side of the line."

"Miklós, you can't do that!" I told him, "If you take it from me, I can't bring a lorry into the circus, because it won't fit!" My God, what a lot of arguments I had with him. All right, but I'd be lying if I said there was never a bit hope. For example, in the early '00s, there was talk of renovating the Capital Circus. I can honestly say this would have been the crowning achievement of my tenure as director! I wanted to raise the dome two and a half feet, but the experts quickly disabused me of that dream. They said that this type of renovation was impossible, because the circus building is for all intents and purposes a concrete block, and it would cost more to remodel the roof sys-

tem than it would to build a new circus. We agreed to demolish it and construct a new building. The tender was announced, with three architectural and engineering firms winning a joint bid to come up with a design. Planning began. I even took the chief architect to Moscow to show him two permanent circuses there – the Nikulin and the Bolshoi – so he could see them in person and understand what was needed and why.

I felt we were making good progress. Then one day, Mr Varjasi arrived with some news: he had been summoned to the ministry, where he was told that we had to cancel the contract with the bidding companies immediately. There would be no renovation and no construction. They had scuttled the entire project.

The news hit me like a bolt from the blue. “It’s not your fault,” I tried to reassure myself, so that I wouldn’t absorb what had happened as my own failure. Later, in the festival programme guide, I allowed myself a little bit of petulant text. Although I hadn’t been beating a big drum over our plans for the new circus building, because I never considered external communication to be a top priority, I still felt I owed an explanation to the audience. The text in the booklet said something like this: “I kept one promise, because the festival is here. However, I must regretfully admit that I was unable to fulfil my other promise. I promised you that you would get to enter the new and renovated Capital Circus of Budapest later this year. Although this is what an audience that loves the Hungarian circus deserves, it is unfortunately less important to the politicians responsible for culture!”

So what kept my spirits up during those years? As an artist born into the circus, my entire life has been driven by the compulsion to prove it. I worked and suffered as an artist to make our production a world-class act. And as director, I struggled to make sure that each of our shows was successful, that the Capital Circus

would remain in its place. I thought hard about what we could do to draw attention to ourselves. I had to prove that this circus is important: it is needed because the viewers love it!

If we hadn’t put on the festival in 1996, I think the Capital Circus would be nothing but a memory today.

OUR FESTIVAL

Few people know where the idea behind the festival started from or how it came into being, not to mention how much we had to work for it, how much stress was involved and how enormous the risks – financial and otherwise – we took on were.

In the late 1990s, we had the feeling that we were expected to throw in the towel. Dealing with constant indifference and the attitude of “What do you want? You don’t fit into the ministry’s budget. You should just be glad you get what we already give you,” suggested to me that our destiny was in our own hands. I felt that the only way to save the Capital Circus was with a festival that would explode its international reputation and earn it worldwide recognition. Only such a massive international event could quickly draw attention to the fact that the circus is indeed an art form and is needed in Hungary.

There weren’t as many festivals before as there are now. We had seen the big ones – Monte Carlo and Paris – but with our feet planted firmly on the ground, we knew that this standard was unattainable for us. With our finances in the shape they were, I never even dreamed that we too would be able to pull off an internationally recognised festival of this level of quality! There was a beautiful festival in Genoa that the Italian director Walter Nones ran in 1994.

By the way, my son also performed at this festival, and I was very proud of him, because he won silver there in a tie with one of the best jugglers in the world, Anthony Gatto. We also looked at this festival, but after careful consideration, we realised that we weren’t capable of organising one like this either, because the performers received

very substantial fees. Later, I learned that Nones too lost a lot of money on this festival, but he didn’t give up and held it again the following year, in a smaller tent. Seeing how this worked, it no longer seemed so impossible to take on the challenge of putting on a festival on this scale. I told Laci Varjasi, the head of MACIVA, that we too would be able to organise something like this one. Having worked at Nones’s circus for more than a year as an acrobat, I was good friends with him, so he allowed me to look into the festival’s budget. It became apparent to me that ticket revenue alone would not be enough to pay for it: television rights also had to be included in the financial plan for such a large-scale event.

How much does it cost to organise an international festival? I will give you our own example. When Ili and I went to the Monte Carlo International Circus Festival in 1977, we received 10,000 francs for our performance plus travel expenses. Then we got another 5,000 US dollars for winning the silver clown. And those were just the fees for one of 70 productions. These are the approximate financial parameters needed for thinking about a quality festival. My friend Eduardo Murillo, the finest impresario in the world, encouraged me, because he thought the idea of having a festival in Budapest was a very good one. I told him I thought so too, except we didn’t have the money. “Wait, I’ll see how we can solve this problem,” he said, and soon afterwards, he was looking for ways to generate sufficient funding by selling the broadcasting rights to Japanese, American and Italian television companies. This outside help was very much needed! Murillo began to spread the word about our festival plans. He talked about it at the Wuqiao Circus Festival in China, for which he was then the international consultant, and then told his brother, who sent word back from Las Vegas that he was interested too. The Russian State Circus also helped me a lot. I can also say that they have stood by me for nearly my entire career

as director and were very supportive of my efforts to save the Capital Circus. They understood and empathised with my hardships, as there are more than 50 permanent circuses in their country. I also owe a great deal to Franz Czeisler. “You should invite a reputable jury and then publish their names, because that’s important!” he suggested, and I took his advice. It was a great pleasure to have the greatest figures in the profession accept our invitations. Included in the jury were the world-renowned Louis Knie, Tim Holst, the Italian directors Eduardo Murillo and Egidio Palmiri, Leonid Kostyuk and Ludmilla Yairova from Russia, Li Xining from China and Hideo Nakamura from Japan. Representing Hungary were Gábor Eötvös and, of course, Czeisler, “The Great Tihany”, who later became the permanent chairman of the festival jury.

We got started, announced it and received a fair number of applications, as the list of jury members from the profession was attractive to them. It was so enticing that, after seeing the names, circus directors from all over Europe notified us, one after another, that they were coming to see the festival!

I would be lying if I said that everything always went like clockwork, because there were also some unpleasant moments. It was in the contracts – and perhaps this was the most important element – that the performing artists would cede their rights to the international television distribution to us. However, I felt it would be easier for artists to come if there was no TV recording. Why? Because when there are television networks around, they think that there’s plenty of money available, it’s just that I don’t want to pay them. The truth, of course, was that we didn’t have two pennies to rub together. But that’s not something one wants to admit.

We could depend on everyone we asked for help: Kristian’s circus artist friends as well as my own artist colleagues and friends. Also

coming were foreign directors and Ludmila Yairova, the head of the entire Russian circus world, who promised to send some marvelous acts to our festival. And that’s exactly what she did! There were also quite touching moments, for example, when the Romanian teeterboard group the Evelyn Marinoff Troupe, winners of the Golden Clown in Monte Carlo, called to ask, almost reproachfully, “You’re hosting a festival and you didn’t call us?” I told them that unfortunately I couldn’t pay a penny, but their answer was, “For you, we’ll come for free, and we’ll even pay for our own travel, if needed!”

This attitude was deeply heart-warming.

So far, I’ve only discussed what we at the Circus did to put all this together. Nevertheless, setting up a festival takes teamwork. The MACIVA staff also did a lot of work in planning and then running it. It would be impossible to list all their contributions, but, for example, they were responsible for the catering, transporting the artists and distributing the tickets. They worked very hard, too! And I knew I could trust them. Even after all these years, I am grateful to everyone who was part of the team at the time. Hats off to them, because when we got started, we had no idea what we were dealing with. We faced a variety of problems, and everything had to be fixed right away, all of which were handled by the “MACIVA girls”. They really deserve all the credit because they worked like circus people during the festival: around the clock. If they had to be, they were on their feet from morning till the next morning!

We constantly learned from our mistakes. One of the most instructive issues, for example, was the matter of accommodation. As we had very little money, we could only find cheap rooms for the artists in the Sport Hotel in Buda. But during the planning phase, we didn’t even think about the extra burden of bussing the artists back and forth, and how much it would cost! Not to mention the fact that this means of transportation was inconvenient for the artists, be-

cause it didn't matter if someone just wanted to rehearse for an hour: because it was a shared bus, they had to wait for the others. The next time we booked the accommodation much closer to the venue.

Was I able to enjoy the festival? I will tell you honestly when the show started, I couldn't allow myself a sense of joy and satisfaction. Each performance brought a fit of anxiety: "Wow, that's a relief. It's over and it worked. It worked well!" There was one day when we didn't even go home, but slept inside on the couch in the office because we were still setting up the lights that night. The walkie-talkie I carried with me practically grew into my hand. I was either out in front or in the back, racing back and forth. My son was upstairs in the lighting booth, and my wife was behind the band making sure the acts went on in the right order. I asked MACIVA for two more crucial people to come help me. The first was Károly Deltai, my brother-in-law and my former partner from our aerial gymnast years, whom I knew I could completely trust with certain installations. Since he and I were the ones in the Hunor group who attached equipment to dome ceilings, I knew his work would be safe. My other assistant was Gyula Varga, who had previously worked as an acrobat and later became the technical director of the Capital Circus. And there is a third person I shouldn't omit: Gábor Németh, the head of the Cinkota site, to whom I also owed a great deal.

This is how our first festival came together.

What was I hoping for? Honestly, what I wanted was for the political leaders in charge of culture to come and watch the show, so that they would understand and feel what the great magic of the circus really is all about. We asked Bálint Magyar, the culture minister at the time, and Budapest mayor Gábor Demszky to be the chief patrons. They both accepted the invitation. This was a huge thing! Magyar even came to the rehearsal for the festival, so we had a chance to talk a bit, and I mentioned to him that television crews were coming

from several countries to record the show. As a result, we received a little financial support from the state. However, this sum was still very small, meaning that the only way we could do the first festival was with the presence and financial support of the television networks. The Americans sent a lighting designer, a director and a film editor and even paid for all the extra state-of-the-art lighting equipment we had to rent. We wouldn't have had the money for things like this.

When the programme editor of the Italian channel Rai3, Marco Zeta, looked through the list of performers and the videos of the artists, he was amazed, saying, "There's so much! What great acts these will be!" And he was right. We had fantastic productions coming, because with the help of our colleagues and the circus directors, we got the numbers that almost immediately put our Budapest festival, and the Capital Circus along with it, on the professional map of the circus world. Nevertheless, we failed to sell out the tickets for the first few days. On Thursday and Friday, the auditorium of the Metropolitan Grand Circus was only three-quarters full, which is not surprising, as we could not put up as much advertising as we wanted. We really didn't have the financial resources for this by that point. Then, after those initial bumpy days, the circus filled up! Despite the higher prices, tickets for the Saturday and Sunday performances sold out, and even Monday's gala was packed!

How did I feel in the end? I was happy! With the first festival, we showed what the circus was like! Or more precisely, what it could be like, so that the audience would understand that it shouldn't be dismissed! The first International Budapest Circus Festival was received very enthusiastically within the profession. It was one thing that the circus directors talked about it appreciatively, but what was perhaps even more important was the fact that the artists also praised it amongst each other! I'll explain

this from an artist's perspective to make it understandable why their recognition was so crucial: appearing at a festival is always an awfully big risk for them, as they only get one or two chances to go out in the ring, but the leadership of the entire circus world is there to see what they do. If they don't do a good job, then they bury their careers for a few years. Established artists are also reluctant to perform at festivals, because they're afraid they won't win. So, this is a serious risk. In addition, the opportunity for rehearsing at festivals is limited.

However, over the years, as the festival became more of a routine, we kept changing things a bit and placed a priority on serving the artists. We ended up giving the acts for whom practice was essential up to an hour and a half to rehearse. This was greatly enjoyed and appreciated by the artists. There was no need to beg anyone to come after that. Many artists even travelled to Budapest to perform as guests of honour, outside of the competition. All for free, of course: simply for prestige and fame! It was also interesting to experience the initial attitude towards the festival. "Okay, it's good that Pityu is trying, but we'll see what he can do," many people thought. In truth, I didn't get such a great deal of support from Hungarian artists, because that's how we are. If any of us want to do something new, something different, maybe something beautiful, there is nothing but envy and schadenfreude. How could Hungarian artists have helped? For example, by coming, applauding and helping to create a positive atmosphere. Anyway, those who were capable of putting on a festival-calibre act were invited to perform. At the first festival, for example, we had Laci Simet and Zsuzsa Simet, who received a bronze prize for their high wire number! In our time, we held the "Hungarian Gala" as an accompanying show, which was a special opportunity for local artists who were not eligible for the festival competition programme to

demonstrate what they could do. At this gala, they got the chance to present their artistic numbers to foreign directors and agents. This show was also useful for business purposes, as many contracts were concluded there.

The first festival achieved its goal: it was a success and elevated the Capital Circus to a worthy position in the circus world. There were so many problems, many many problems, but we always solved them! Of course, we had MACIVA behind us, but we, the Krisztóf family, were the ones responsible for everything. The risk was great, because if the event had fallen apart, I would have had to bear the disgrace for the rest of my life. I wouldn't have been able to just grab my briefcase and go work in another office somewhere, since I'm a circus person. That's where I was born and that's where I live my life.

It is a very serious endeavour to hold a festival on this scale and to raise its reputation to such heights. We needed three years of planning, years full of fear and anxiety. We held the first one in March 1996, and every other year from then on. I would be connected to a total of eight more festivals up until 2012. We reached the point where we were considered to be among the top three festivals in the world. In descending order of prestige, it was Monte Carlo, Paris and then Budapest. Later, the directors of the Russian state Rosgos Circus also asked me for advice on running a festival. This one was also held in the autumn of 1996 in Red Square, where I was an invited jury member.

Was there anything I regretted about the festival? At the third festival, I vowed never to sign an extremely young artist again. Eduardo Murillo recommended Zhang Fan, a ten-year-old slack wire acrobat from China. (He has since become one of the best in the world, a truly fantastic talent.) This kid won the festival, despite the huge productions he was up against. At the end of the festi-

val, there was extensive press coverage: “A ten-year-old child has won the Budapest International Circus Festival,” the newspapers wrote. Of course, I couldn’t add an explanatory note that this kid had been practising like an adult since he was four, not to mention using the Chinese method. (Which means they tie a rope to his feet, and he stands on his hands until he collapses. He might even get a couple of slaps in the face if he can’t maintain the handstand as long as his coaches think he ought to.) In spite of all the other fantastic productions, what entered the public consciousness was the fact that “a child won,” and that was a great lesson for me.

And that is the true story of the Budapest International Circus Festival. We planned it, we executed it, and I am very proud of it!

IT WOULD ONLY HAVE BEEN A FEW MORE MONTHS

I have been fortunate in many ways. For example, I’m lucky in that I’ve never experienced feelings of envy or jealousy. Of course, I never had any reason to experience anything like this, because I’ve worked for everything I got. I have also always been able to sense when enough is enough. I had previously indicated to the Deputy Secretary of State for Culture of the day that I would like to finish my tenure as director after 25 years. It would have been so beautiful that way. In the end, however, things turned out differently.

In 2012, a new era was palpably beginning at the Capital Circus. After the departure (by mutual agreement) of László Varjasi, a new CEO came from the ministry to take over control of MACI-VA. I had a conversation with him in which I told him, “I want to retire on 31 March 2013. This date is important to me because then I could tell myself that I was an acrobat for 30 years and a circus director for 25. I was appointed on 1 April and, if possible, I’d like my successor to take over on the same date.”

I can still see the CEO’s face before me as he told me that, despite my request, we would be – by mutual agreement – parting company after the end of Budapest Circus Festival in late January.

To tell the truth, by this time I was already running the circus as a pensioner, so I could be removed without justification under the prevailing labour laws. However, those 25 years were important to me as a number. It only would have been a few more months. But what could I do? I acknowledged the decision. Some part of me understood, because new leadership always involves change.

I was being evicted from the director's chair in the circus. I wasn't worried about the institution's future, though, as I knew of an oral agreement made three months earlier promising that my son would be made the artistic director of MACIVA (a title with great significance in the world of the circus). But in the end, this did not take place either.

My problems with the new head of MACIVA led to tense days. Plus, all this was happening right before our ninth International Circus Festival. However, the circus is sacred to me, so the guests attending the press conference didn't notice anything of what was going on behind the scenes: I put on a poker face in front of an audience of 50 or 60 journalists and told them how fantastic the festival would be. Because we were directing this show, it was still ours. Kristian stayed up all night at the circus with the chief lighting technician and the sound technician so that all the performing artists would have flawless lighting and sound set up for their acts on time. The event was ready to go.

The last thing we did was a full rehearsal of the Hungarian Gala, and then I asked the artists if anyone had any questions, because I would not be there the next day. Even in this difficult period, we were not friendless, and someone who saw through the situation suggested that, in my own interest, I should formally declare in writing that I was handing over the festival to the new management in a state of readiness.

I was just about to leave the circus building when I was called back and told to round up the artists again too, because the new head of MACIVA had an announcement to make. It was then that I learned that the person taking my place as the director of the Capital Circus of Budapest was my cousin Jócó Richter. Even today, I have a hard time finding the words to describe what I felt then. I wasn't well, I had to go to the doctor. There was a problem with my heart,

it was beating wildly. This had happened before, but now it was recurring. "Mr Kristóf," the cardiologist said, "you'll be staying here with us for two or three days.

Meanwhile, the Russian artists were protesting at the circus. A very talented aerial acrobat named Anastasia Makeeva even made T-shirts bearing the name "Kristóf" for the entire Russian delegation, and their plan was to march into the grand finale of the festival wearing them. I managed to talk them out of this. I thanked them for their support and asked them not to wear their T-shirts. Let the festival and the audience remain sacred, and let's leave them out of what's going on behind the scenes. Everyone honoured my request. This is the love of the circus. And it's more than pride, because it transcends everything else!

The festival went down nicely, and at the end, I had my farewell at the gala. I knew about it, but honestly, I was expecting something much more subdued and modest. When Gábor Farkas, the host, sang "My Way", the audience stood up and I saw several people weeping. Afterwards, I collected so many awards that I started to feel uncomfortable. I have received recognition from the Cirque du Soleil, the Nikulin Circus, the Kobzov Circus and other institutions, along with MACIVA's Lifetime Achievement Award for my work as circus director. The latter seemed very strange to me, and I asked the financial director, "They send me away, and then they want to decorate me?" That's when I realised that she was the one who had arranged the award on her own initiative. So we had the farewell, and I can see today that the way things turned out is all for the best, because the work that the managers appointed by the minister are doing today could not be endured by a true circus person. Life at the Capital Circus became different. Everything changed! What happened to us after that? Nothing at all. Kristian received contract offers and travelled abroad with his aerial acrobat partner,

Natalia Demjén. I like, or so she claimed, was especially pleased with this situation because many times she felt that she had had enough of our life in the circus and had grown tired of it. She also saw the opportunities presented by our new phase of life and began planning what places we would travel to. Today, I think this attitude of hers was just an attempt to help me deal with the adjustment.

A few years later, at a premiere performance, I met the now-former MACIVA CEO who had sacked me. He apologised for what had happened, as did my cousin Jócó. “They asked me to accept,” he explained of his appointment as director. Obviously, if they had asked someone else, that person would have accepted it too. Some months afterwards, the new management published a book about MACIVA titled “The Art of Entertainment”, which included a separate chapter on the history of the festival. Except they forgot to include our names! Nowhere is it mentioned that the Kristófs existed at all, nor of course the fact it was thanks to the Kristófs that the Budapest International Circus Festival was born.

What am I supposed to say to that?

Despite all this, I am a satisfied, happy person and I know what is what in this profession. I don’t think any Hungarian director has received as much international recognition as I have over the years. Fortunately, my colleagues abroad never forgot what I had accomplished here in Hungary. For the professional partners I worked with for decades, it didn’t matter that I had been removed from the circus by “mutual agreement”, because our relationships with each other remained.

As did the respect. Perhaps the best proof of this is the fact that, right after I was sacked, I was invited to serve on the jury at the Monte Carlo International Circus Festival, and I have been continuously asked to attend international competitions and professional confe-

rences ever since. The world of the circus respects me. So honestly, what more respect does one need? Life is full of strange twists and turns. For 24 years, I fought to make policymakers pay attention to the circus, recognise its value and support its operations with proper finance. I never thought that this would lead to my own downfall one day. Why am I saying this?

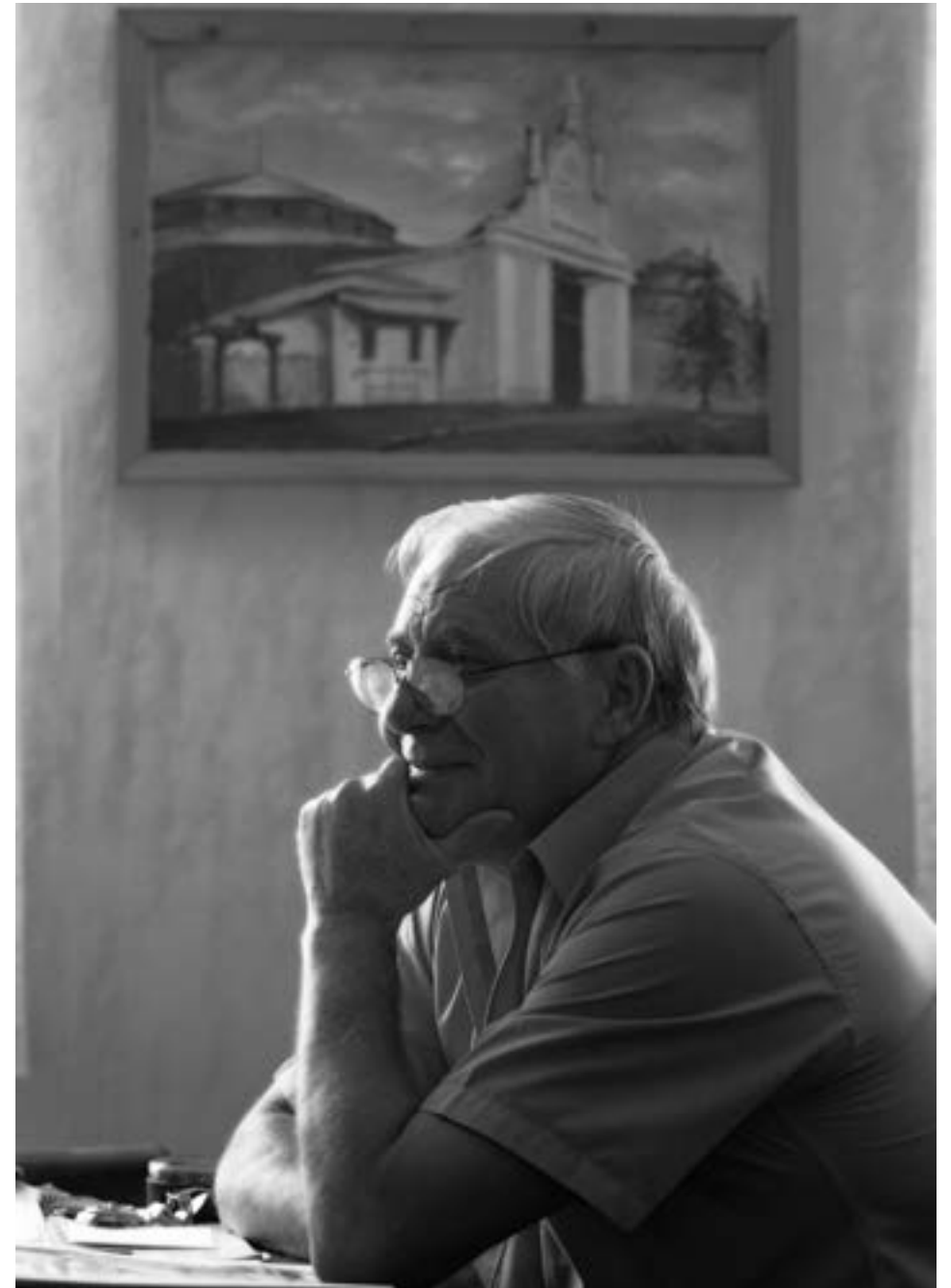
After I won my battle to have the Capital Circus admitted into the corporate tax credit scheme, the institution suddenly became eligible for several hundred million forints of support. The irony of fate is that this is what led to my ousting, as the politicians noticed not only what a cultural treasure the circus was, but also it was one that had money.



Receiving the Tihany Award from Franz Czeisler. "The Great Tihany". Capital Circus (1996)



With János Gálfi and the stagehands. Capital Circus (1996)



In my office at the Capital Circus (2008)



Receiving the Cirque du Soleil Lifetime Achievement Award, Capital Circus (2012)

(photo credit: Ádám Urbán)

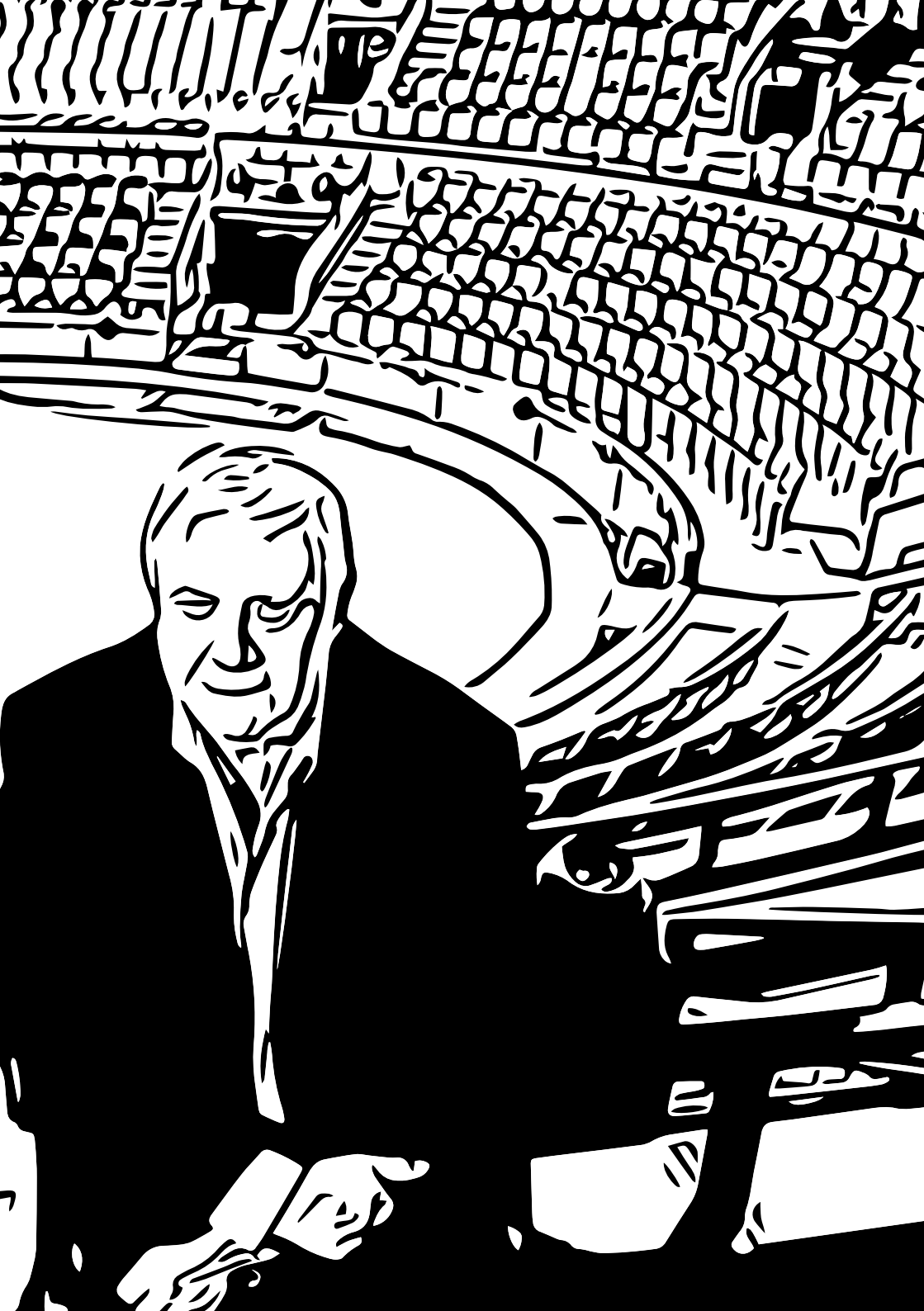


My farewell at the Ninth Budapest International Circus Festival (2012), Capital Circus

(photo credit: Ádám Urbán)



Russian circus artists showing solidarity, Capital Circus (2012)



CHAPTER
FOUR

SPECTATORS ARE WHAT SUSTAINS THE CIRCUS

I frequently used to watch the audience. I usually stood in entrance No. 14, which, when viewed from the front, is on the upper floor at the left, next to the band. Afterwards, I often then sat in the auditorium or walked around the aisles and watched the reactions of the spectators, listening to their comments to find out whether everything was okay. The circus provides an experience for the audience that no other “live” genre can offer, because here the whole family can have fun for all ages together, something that can be said for only a few other branches of the arts.

I can see the world changing and, at the same time, it is unmistakable how the audience’s demands are increasing. While fifty years ago, no one was bothered when the carpet in the circus got muddy on a rainy day, today they think, “If I pay for something, then I expect quality”. There is nothing wrong with that either, as spectators are what sustains the circus. It’s important how the lobby looks when I arrive, what kind of chair I’m sitting on, and how friendly the ushers are when they guide me to my seat. It may be a little easier for travelling circuses, since they journey from one place to another, but, obviously, they also have to pay attention to the details. Because if a small family circus exhibits tidiness and cleanliness, and even the small children with the circus are dressed in nice costumes, the spectator will go home satisfied at the end of the performance and say, “Everything was so cute! That was a lot of fun!”

Although it’s still possible that they might not be overwhelmed with delight, they’ll still take away a pleasant memory. Incidentally, it was with this attitude that the world-famous Roncalli Circus proved a

long time ago that it was not necessary to feature a parade of international stars in order to win over the audience. More importantly, spectators should feel like they are on holiday when they enter the doors into the circus, as the reason they are there is to have fun and relax. Does anyone ever feel frightened when watching James Bond jump off a plane in a film? No, right? At the circus, though, people’s palms will most certainly start to sweat with excitement when they see live acrobats up on the trapeze. The circus affects our emotions: that’s what makes it so amazing! Gyuri Heitz, the former artistic director of the Capital Circus, once put it aptly: “The circus truly is art, even if it is only seated at the end of the arts table, among the poorer relatives. It impacts people by emotional means and with different atmospheres. It does not seek to explain, but instead simply captivates. There are heroes in the circus, just as there are in the theatre. But with us, there are only protagonists. There are no antagonists!”

It is not an easy thing to be the director of a permanent circus, as one cannot be built next to, say, a housing estate, where one might erect a tent so that a grandfather or grandmother can just “pop down” with her grandchild. The permanent circus remains in a fixed location, so the expectations of the spectators should not be ignored. You need to find a balance that will help build a relatively constant audience base. I am thinking here of spectators who come to the circus at least once a year. We once conducted a survey that found that 40% of our audience visits the auditorium at least twice a year. This circus-loving audience should be retained, and everyone else should be encouraged to come too.

Whoever is running the Capital Circus of Budapest must always bear in mind the fact that he must serve the institution’s core audience intelligently, consciously and well. I’m not saying I was a genius, but the three shows we presented in a given year were always funda-

mentally different in terms of both theme and content. In my view, a spectator who comes to the Capital Circus of Budapest once should also buy another ticket later and come even when there are no wild animals on display, but to see a Chinese acrobatic show or a Russian water circus we are presenting. Yes, I miscalculated occasionally when a production I signed was high quality in professional terms, but the audience still didn't appreciate it as much as I would have expected. The best atmosphere at the Capital Circus was at the Saturday evening performances. On those evenings, the nuanced gags and subtle jokes meant for adults were better understood than on other performance days, even if the house was only half full.

Every audience is different. For example, children need special attention. This is another complex thing. It is not at all insignificant who brought the child to the circus – the parents or an organised group, like their school. This is because if they come with their mother and father, they will automatically be influenced by the adults, that is, what the parents enjoy will most likely amuse them as well. With groups of children, however, this is not so easy, because their interest is usually fleeting. One can imagine how difficult it is for an acrobat to perform a serious act in such a case. The leads to the question, then, of what children really need. Humour or rather animal acts? In my experience, both are needed, as the circus is for everyone, regardless of age.

On the other hand, it is a good idea to ensure the production is not too long. This is an unwritten rule that is good for the circus artist to pay attention to, especially for clowns and “animal” attractions. Unfortunately, it often happens that these performers will remain inside the ring until the audience stops clapping. Yet this is not good, because in such cases the applause is, so to speak, “forced”. You have to pay close attention to such developments! Top inter-

nationally acclaimed productions have also been the best in this regard because these performers feel how long the applause should go on and when it is time to continue the act or leave the ring.

In any case, we used to operate by the guideline that “the audience should still be clapping when the curtain closes behind you,” meaning that performers should not exit the ring in silence. Applause has a proper length anyway: one minute is still sincere, but a second minute may not be. If the audience gives a standing ovation, then that's different, because then you have to stay there for a while. A really good performer can sense exactly how long. This is the feeling I had as the director when I sent the Kisfaludy teeterboard group back to the ring at one of the performances. They were the closing act, and they got a huge round of applause as they walked out, but I stepped in front of the curtain, spread my hands, signalling to them to go back. That's when something that had never happened before occurred: the audience of the Capital Circus stood up to applaud! What a fantastic moment that was!

Anyway, another reason it's nice to work at the Capital Circus is because people sit close to the stage, and the performer can face the audience. If the spectators “take them up on this” and smile at the performer, then there develops between them the kind of relationship that I think is very important, because one of our many tasks is to pay attention to the audience and feel their energy. And yes, a clown should also notice when a young child is waving at him! The director's job is to sign the artists based on having a comprehensive concept for the entire show in his head from the very beginning. You need to know exactly what the beginning will be like for the acts to come one after the other and most importantly: how it should end. The goal is for the audience to get up from their seats with their jaws open and not close them until they get home; because this is the only way to build a regular core audience.

A good example in this respect is Switzerland's world-famous Circus Knie, because it is only a slight exaggeration to say that they can do anything, and every one of their performances sells out. How does one achieve this? There are no strict boundaries. You simply need to know which productions the audience will react to, and in a well-organised show, the reaction comes naturally, without effort. These are important rules.

For example, if I place together two acts that require the audience to watch with restraint, then I need a clown to loosen them up. However, you also have to pay attention to the reverse, because while a lot of laughter is a good thing, it shouldn't be a constant thing. Plus, if I put the acts in the right order, one helps the next, building up for the atmosphere to explode for the main attraction.

The circus' repertoire is wide, and as director I tried to present all of it, without letting "just anyone" into the ring in Budapest. I also had my own favourites, such as our shows "Hungarian Gala", "Encore" and "Festival Plus", with the clown Henry Ayala.

Of course, I wouldn't claim to have always put on great material, because I was operating under severe financial constraints. What the audience saw in my time in the Budapest Grand Circus was a programme put together under very modest conditions, because – as I mentioned earlier – I had to make do with nothing but the box office revenues to fund it. My God, I can't count the number of times I had to bargain with myself! I couldn't get a lot of the acts I wanted, and there were innumerable times when I said to myself, "It's no good, Pityu, you can't afford them!" I was very lucky with the Russians, who charged lower fees to perform for us because of our strong institutional relationships, developed over many years. Russian artists were always happy and comfortable performing in Budapest and wanted to help by supporting us. This relationship was tremendously valuable for us, because very few large circuses

in the West were able to pay the higher fees the Russians felt they should pay for the same acts that came to work with us. It's difficult to maintain the magic of the classical circus I love so much. I am proud that, for the 24 years I served as director, the Capital Circus of Budapest was able to retain its audience: 250-300,000 visitors a year, despite all the financial difficulties. We were able to operate for ten and a half months of the year, with eight performances a week, all for a paying audience. At that time, there were no other permanent circuses in Europe with such a busy schedule.

What was the secret? I think we need to go back in time to discover the answer to that one, all the way back to the period of nationalisation. The travelling circuses were stripped of everything they had, but the Capital Circus of Budapest remained intact and came under the leadership of directors like Nándor Barton. Although he was not born into the world of circus artists, having trained as a gymnast, he still loved the circus very much. Later on, another gymnast took the director's post: Lajos Fekete, yet another honourable man. He was the one who authorised our wedding to take place at the circus. That period had its own difficulties, such as political guidelines that at first prohibited sequins, feathers and glitter, and even performing in shorts. My father took undying offence when his proposal to perform his strong man act in a Roman gladiator costume was denied. These few years destroyed his spirit. So in terms of political ideologies, this period was not an easy one, but at least the directors of the Capital Circus were circus lovers!

For the most part, the institution only operated during the summer. Then, from 1971, when the new, heated building was handed over, it started welcoming spectators all year round. The Budapest circus was so popular that it was impossible to find tickets for its performances! In my opinion, this legacy is what enabled me to manage the establishment for 24 years. But we can never rest on

our laurels! The world is constantly changing, and the circus is no longer people's sole entertainment option. From the mid-'70s, television emerged as a rival, and later on, home video appeared, and cinema evolved. Today we have to compete with the crazy oversupply of online space. The range of services that are available for audiences is constantly and rapidly expanding. It is true that we no longer live as we did in 1975, as now every family has a car that allows them all to go wherever they like and choose programmes that suit them. Perhaps this is a contributing factor to the fact that fewer people are visiting the Budapest circus each year. But even so, many viewers can still be retained. More precisely: they should be retained!

The way I see it, I might not be receptive to a centrally run "Ervin Lázár" programme in which every schoolchild is obliged to attend the circus whether they wish to or not, just so they can "get to know the world of the circus, and when they grow up, they will come back." This may not be the correct method... What is simply not an option is for the audience to leave the Capital Circus thinking, "Well, that really wasn't so bad." They should be saying, "That was so great, I'm going to go back!"

The show should not simply be watchable: it should be magical and uplifting! When foreign circus directors and agents came to visit back then, they would say, "It's well worth your time going to a show at the Capital Circus of Budapest, because there are many fine acts there!" Thanks to this positive general opinion, the artists were also highly enthusiastic about coming to work with us, as the news spread that it was a good spot. I am proud of the fact that I am the one who established this trend, because earlier on, this circus, in an international professional sense, did not have any kind of reputation at all. When it was operating under MACIVA, the director had nothing to do with the shows: the performers were se-

lected by the artistic and international departments, and the show directors were always presented with *faits accomplis*: "That's what we've got; do what you can with it!" My predecessor as circus director, Tomi Radnóti, complained to me many times, "You know, Pityu, no one is less involved in the shows than I am. I'm really not much more than an attendant, a caretaker."

I changed all this. I asked the production directors to sit down with me to discuss what kind of show they wanted, and then we signed the acts based on their ideas. This process did not go completely smoothly with everyone, but there were directors I was always very happy to work with, such as Zsolt Gyökösi. This experiment in independent directing gradually petered out due to financial constraints, and all responsibility passed to the circus director.

The past is important, because to be able to build something new, we need a solid foundation. The Capital Circus is on a solid footing, since despite all its difficulties, the institution has succeeded in developing a circus-loving audience in Hungary. The only task ahead now is to continue building in an intelligent fashion.

It's a big responsibility!

I'M ALWAYS A CRITIC

To this day, I still see everything, unfortunately. There are times when I reproach myself, asking why I feel the need to notice every little detail. I watch performances with a critical eye, and, in truth, I wouldn't know how to do otherwise, because I can only look at them from a professional point of view. I should just keep my mouth shut, but what can I do? Sometimes the damned professional in me can't be held back. My son has already distanced himself from this attitude. Many times he's told me, "Dad, you're quibbling over every single thing!" I'm trying to learn from him how to watch a production in a sophisticated fashion without completely dissecting it.

What do I look for in a show? The key thing for me is perhaps to see that the artist is a true performer. You can tell if they enjoy what they are doing, because if they do, this also has an effect on the viewer. An artist's personality is an important part of what makes them lovable. At the circus school, students should be taught as early on as possible that when the curtain opens, some 1,500 people are there watching every step they make. Our most important task is to entertain, because that's our profession, so the viewer needs to see that the artist is doing what they are doing out of love and devotion, making the best possible use of everything they have available to them!

I'm always happy when I go to see the Hungarian National Circus, the Flórián Richter Circus or the Eötvös Circus and find that I enjoy the performance. Of course, it annoys me if I notice that the carpet in the ring is dirty, and it really upsets me if my

hand gets dirty from grabbing the railing at the Capital Circus. These are little things, but very important ones, and I am always a critic. I could just shrug my shoulders since I am retired and have already done my duty. Yet I can't do that because it hurts me deeply to see these things.

I was always critical as a director too. In my time, not just anyone got to perform at the Capital Circus, because it was a prestigious thing to get a contract with us and perform in our ring. I would go and watch anyone in the travelling circuses. Once I told someone, "Okay, but you should get another horse, because there aren't enough horses in the ring. How about a horse-to-horse somersault?" Then a year later, the artist got in touch with me: "Pityu! I have three horses now. Come and take a look!" And then they could come and perform at the Capital Circus. They had worked for it. In fact, later on, I helped to book them with Ringling Brothers.

There were no exceptions: the only things that mattered were professional considerations. That's why I said no to a lot of my relatives in the circus business, or simply didn't invite them to perform. This doesn't mean that I can't award praise, because I do recognise quality. But I can't turn a blind eye to mistakes. I also always share my opinions with the State Commissioner for Culture, Péter Fekete: "You've brought an act here that I wouldn't allow into the ring, even if they paid me." Unfortunately, even now I often see productions that, even though I wish I could approve of them, have no place at the Capital Circus of Budapest. They are simply not up to that standard! I have earned a professional reputation abroad that is unquestionable. And there is a reason for this. But I never boasted about it. I've never said how many times I've served on a jury (more than thirty times, for the record), and I don't even mention being invited to the festivals. "We would be honoured with your presence," they say, and I don't feel the need

to announce to everyone that I've been invited. Nowadays, for some people, the communication aspect is more important than the actual facts behind them.

The world of the circus is a small and insular one. I know all sorts of things about its history, some of which I'd rather not know. This may sound strange, but it is true that being the director of the Capital Circus of Budapest doesn't mean everyone will love you. Here in Hungary, some members of the profession hate me: these are the ones whom I never allowed to perform with us while I was the director. "This Kristóf is a bastard!" they thought, and they may still think that, the Hungarian travelling circus directors who remained seated at the 2016 Budapest International Circus Festival when the entire auditorium stood to applaud me. I saw them and didn't care. The outlook of circus artists is an interesting one, but I understand it, because we have grown into this mentality, and we still live with it today. Many people use their own reasoning to try to "explain" themselves, or to use a more fashionable term: to position themselves. I think this is superfluous, as it is always the market that determines how much my production is worth, and not myself. There are no misunderstandings in the circus: we find out everything we need to know when we're in the ring!

In some people's view, the word "circus" is a broad concept that encompasses everything. That's why I'm always angry to hear this opinion, even if there is some truth to it. The term really does embrace a great many things: long ago it even included various forms of wrestling. But precisely because it encompasses so many different things, some of them are now causing damage to the word "circus". Sure, in the old days in America, the circuses had so-called side-shows featuring bearded ladies, giants standing two and a half metres tall and dwarfs of 60 centimetres, since all this was part of the show. But this era is over. Of course, a 60-centimetre-tall little person can still perform, but his height in and of itself does not make for a fully-fledged production. It's a problem when the viewer feels, "I was disappointed by the circus, so I'm not going to go back for a while." As I've mentioned several times, perhaps too many times, I've truly struggled all my life to have the circus both respected and loved by visitors, and even to be seen as an important player among the performing arts.

I fear for the circus. More specifically, I am worried about the Capital Circus of Budapest, because I have more confidence in the institution of the circus as a whole. I think it is safe to say that there will still be tent circuses in fifty years, but I am no longer so sure about the situation of permanent circuses. Therefore, I cannot emphasise this enough: they have to be cared for! This marvel that the viewer gets to be part of with each performance must be preserved.

I performed as an artist in Sofia, at the Bulgarian State Circus, which later burned down. The government promised to construct

a new one, but the country still does not have a circus facility.

I fear that the Capital Circus will share a similar fate. I know the building very well, from the top of the dome to the bottom of the basement. We never had money for renovations in my time, nor was there any previously. Even back during my tenure, sometimes parts of the building had to be closed to the public because the underfloor heating – which heats the foyer and the concourses – had broken down and water was flowing out. From time to time, a plan for a new circus building is floated, along with proposals to move it to a different location. Although I try to convince myself that such a solution will still be beneficial, my attachment to the place where the building stands now is stronger. I simply feel that the home of the Capital Circus is the City Park, to which it is connected by 130 years of history.

Even back when the old building was demolished in 1966, there were plans to rebuild it in the People's Park, further south in the city. But my father and all the other old artists protested against this idea tooth and nail. "You can't move it anywhere," they said even back then, "This circus belongs here!"

The reason why they felt it was important for the circus to remain there was because in those days, the City Park was still full of people at weekends. From the neighbouring zoo and amusement park, families would go straight to the circus for a complete City Park experience. Of course, the park has changed a great deal since then, and let's be honest, it's no longer what it once was. Mums no longer stroll with their children down Állatkerti Boulevard, and the amusement park is gone. While the world may change though, one thing never changes: there is always demand for the circus!

I am anxiously observing the fate of the Capital Circus, finding I have more and more questions: if they modernise it and fill it

with, say, holograms or video animation technology, what need will there be for actual live performers? Will the new direction be to project everything on huge screens or to present "circus theatre", increasingly dominated by spoken dialogue? By the way, I am particularly suspicious of the latter, because there is no need for chatter at the circus: this is what makes it an international genre capable of addressing everyone, because there is no extensive commentary, and no need for it, either. We shouldn't start pretending the circus is a theatre, on the grounds of "renewal", because we already have separate theatres for that. At the circus, we "do" circus. Spectators long for traditional circus, and we must fight to keep it that way while still maintaining quality. There are no misunderstandings in this genre: the measure of a production is always how many performances it can last for and whether it draws a full house of willing spectators eight times a week.

Attempts at theatrical productions, incidentally, are nothing new at the Capital Circus. As early as July 1934, the renowned actress Marika Röck and actor Pál Jávör played the titular role in the operetta *The Circus Star*, up in the air on the trapeze, and later on, they staged aquatic revues there too. When I was director, I also put on a lot of things like this, such as the "Wild West Circus," in which Olga Simet portrayed an American Indian performing ballet on a tightrope. She even grew her hair and dyed it black for the lead role. (I was the one who mounted the rope, knowing the dome of the circus building like the palm of my hand. Later, I heard back from Olga how much she appreciated this gesture of mine.) Nevertheless, all our efforts were in vain: this revival of "Wild West" was not a success.

It's a silly word, this "circus renewal". I do not understand exactly what they want to renew? Fifty years earlier, the circus tent was held up by two poles, and when a storm came, we were terrified that

it might collapse. Today, though, they are air-conditioned, heated, and can withstand winds of up to 120 kilometres per hour. So what I am saying is that the circus has been evolving all along, and thank God, it will continue to evolve forever. Renewal is needed, as travelling circuses are usually self-sustaining – in plain language, they have to cater to the market to survive financially – and must focus all their efforts on earning revenues. There was a time when people were mostly interested in animal acts, so a huge menagerie of elephants, zebras and giraffes had to be maintained. But all that was needed then, though, was a simple procession around the ring, because that counted as a genuine attraction too. Then came the time when the audience began to think differently about animals; that is, they did not react to such productions in the same way as before. Instead of having a dominant trainer, today the value lies in the partnership, the harmony between the animal and its trainer. There have been circuses that closed because they were unable to live up to such demands from their audiences. The circus needs to evolve because it is run by the consumer market, and freelance artists need to evolve along with it. Otherwise, they won't get a contract.

The circus already has its own charm, and yet many directors succumb to the lure of technology and install screens – like at concerts for many thousands of spectators – to play back what the audience has just seen live anyway. But there is a big difference here: while at the concert, the viewer is happy to accept the approach and the extra spectacle, in a performance at the circus he already sees everything up close enough that he has to experience the moment there and then, as it happens. It's not a good choice to put the viewer in front of the screen to watch video playback, a slow-motion version, or even live action in real time. I think the audience should focus on a single place and time: the circus and the present!

In any case, I trust – and I agree with my son on this – that people will continue to be interested in live productions, and as a result, there will continue to be a demand for circuses. But I'm not protesting against the new. I might be mighty old, yet I don't just accept any old thing. I've watched several shows by Cirque du Soleil: this type of circus is also beautiful and highly professional. No wonder their performances attract huge crowds: they really take great care to always present super productions. They make sure the juggler is skilful, the contortionist girl is flexible, and the aerialist boy is strong. On the other hand, the scenery and the technology they use – despite all their appeal – are almost too much for me, because they suppress the artist. It remains my belief that the circus will only survive as long as the human body remains at its core.

After all this, how do I imagine the circus can be renewed? Make everything comfortable and modern. When the spectators arrive, they should feel good. And it's also desirable to have the air conditioner running to keep you from sweating, and if the ladies don't have to queue to use the toilet any more, because now it's much bigger than before. These, too, are all types of "renewal", and they truly are needed. As for exactly where we're heading, I still don't know. I still have to wait with the criticism regarding the direction of all the developments that are happening now. It will take time before I can judge what it means for the circus if the wild animals vanish from the stage. Is it still going to be able to generate revenue without an elephant and a lion? Will there be a thousand people in the auditorium, or just two hundred? One thing is sure: permanent circuses are always more difficult to run. I saw how the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris, with its millions in funds, reduced the number of their performances, and then for years, they didn't even hold any shows: it became merely the home for a single week of the Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain a prestigious festival for young (U25) artists. There are also

two circuses in Moscow – a city with a population of twelve million – yet neither of them operates all year round: only for seven or eight months and averaging only around five shows a week.

Currently, the Covid-19 virus has us in another crisis. This is a catastrophic situation for everyone involved with the circus world. The circuses had to be closed and, unable to do their work, the people there didn't have jobs. Everyone tried to get through this period somehow. However, this is only one aspect of the virus crisis. The other thing I fear is that online shows will be a problem in the long run. Companies tried to transfer performances and festivals to the online space, which can be justified with the reasoning that "no one should have to go without the circus." Except the circus is not an online genre! It is difficult for a circus artist to work without an audience. It's awful, for example, for a clown accustomed to seeing how the audience reacts to his moves. They cannot do this through a monitor or a television screen. It's terrible! The circus has to be seen live. The artists have to be face to face with the audience, because if they aren't, the circus loses its true charm.

There was a time when television became very interested in circus shows. In the '60s, the Americans even came to Hungary to shoot footage, and both my sister and myself were featured in one of these shows doing our aerial act. Around that same time, Italian television network Rai3 would also broadcast a circus show at Christmas and Easter. These broadcasts were gradually phased out, and nowadays the only thing they still show – albeit cut down to an abbreviated format – is the Monte Carlo International Circus Festival. Why did this happen that way? Because of exactly what I just said: the circus cannot be enjoyed through a screen. Or perhaps only if the viewer has already seen the show before, or if he has any memories or experiences related to some other circus performance. But this is just my opinion.

Here in Hungary, we have the "Ervin Lázár Programme" I've already mentioned many times. This brings students to places like the Capital Circus, to watch a reduced format show (60-70 minutes with no intermission), and then the management gets to announce, "We had 15% more viewers this year than last. This is how we educate the circus audience of the future." But this is an enormous lie! The students are brought, of course, as it is mandatory for them to go, by government decree, but this instils neither love nor desire for the circus in children. It's horrible for artists to perform a reduced-length, half-done show for schoolchildren who are just fooling around with each other in the auditorium the whole time! This is the painful prize our profession is paying now for the current financing. In my time, we financed the institution from ticket sales, which meant that revenue was important. There was a period when there was hardly any money at all, and the government wanted to shut down the Capital Circus. And now, the shoe is on the other foot, and in comes the money, a whole lot of money. Of course, it is a truly good thing that the politicians have "discovered the Budapest circus" and made it a key national institution. On the other hand, since this happened, I've seen everything become self-serving as the circus is transformed into a theatre in the name of renewal. What is happening is inflicting damage, in professional terms, on Hungarian circus art and its artists that will be difficult to repair. According to our value system, this is nothing less than a crime!

To this day, my friends call me when they happen to be in the vicinity of the Capital Circus and notice that half of the letters in the sign on the roof have been burnt out for some time. This troubles me, because the people who are responsible for this state of affairs also should realise that the Capital Circus of Budapest is much more than a building slated for demolition. For us, it is our national theatre.

In fact, more like our church!

OPEN THE CURTAINS FOR THEM

I always regret wasted time, so I say the best thing for children preparing for the world of the circus is to start practising as early as possible. By around age ten, they must be taught to feel that their movements are natural, and they should be conscious of the fact that they are working to become performers whom many people will watch. And at the age of 12 or 14, they should go and start performing, as world-class acts are born in the ring, not in the rehearsal room. This career must be made to sound attractive and discussed honestly, because anyone who wants to enter the ring should know that nothing is free in this profession. The artist is an artist of the body, and we suffer with our blood and sweat in order to succeed. A young person who comes from outside, from the “civilian” world, may not be aware of this. He may not know that the juggler also has to bend down thousands of times to pick up whatever he has dropped and can never give up.

We should tell young people, “What you have just chosen is one of the loveliest professions in the world, a beautiful life, but you still have much more to do before you can be successful at it!” Because it’s a nice thing to stand on the podium when the medal is hung around your neck, but you also need to know that there’s a lot of suffering behind this award. This is not a profession that can be learned sitting in classroom: you have to suffer physically for this damned career as well. Here, if you want to catch someone doing an airborne somersault, many times they will kick you in the head, and it will hurt. In fact, they might even rip your ears open too. Then, even during your years as an active artist, you still

have to live by strict rules: everything is subordinated to contracts and performances. Yet I still believe that this is the most beautiful occupation in the world, even if you have to suffer for it; if you put energy and work into it, you will be able to feel yourself progressing from one step to the next. Everything is up to you, and you can move up through your own work. Some people may try to trip you up, but no one can ever take away from you the skill you have fought for and the reputation you have created for yourself in the world of the circus!

What makes a circus artist truly good? Perhaps most importantly, it is really wanting to be an artist. It’s less preferable to have someone who is subdued and withdrawn. Anyone who chooses this career should really yearn to perform and show themselves. If a child has this kind of exhibitionist ambition, the rest is up to his teacher. There is competition, and not just a little bit of it. In addition, circus artists have to compete with the whole world, because there are a lot of people working in each of the genres, and there is an international standard. This standard is well known to circus professionals, so they cannot be fooled. Countless theories have emerged as to what can be presented and how. What matters are the personalities, the music, the costumes and the idea itself, the idea that the artist wishes to convey.

Technical value is important. However, even though the acrobatic profession is international, we are not like actors who can perform on the same stage all the time. The circus is different. If the audience has already seen “Duo Kristof” once, it will very likely be boring for them if it is presented again in another show too soon.

We also will never be famous.

One thing is important: be good at what you do, because then you will be needed, and you will get contracts. In the world of the cir-

cus – at the international – there is not so much of a “family connections” mindset, meaning no one will sign you just because, say, “your father was good”. It is a very fine thing to be invited to perform with world-famous circuses, but it should be noted that you cannot “just happen” to get into such places. You have to work as part of a circus first, even in the most difficult conditions. The tent needs to be erected and struck, even in the rain and unbearable heat. It is best for someone who is preparing for a life as a circus artist to know all this from the very beginning. On the other hand, for a kid who stays motivated after coming to understand all this and still sees his future lies in a career as a circus artist, then hats off to him, because he’s really in love with the circus!

When we were young and went into the rehearsal room, we immediately started training, doing the same act we had been doing for years. Whichever trick we were having trouble with because it lacked height or was “a little messy” we practised with a lunge belt and safety line, repeating it over and over until it was flawless.

Because there were hardly any teachers at the school, some of the more talented older students were called in to help teach. This proved to be a very good idea, because the young people were somehow able to convince us what we needed to do more effectively. Of course, this also required whoever was teaching us the trick to know how to do it himself. It is impossible to teach without adequate practical knowledge, because only those who know what their student is capable of and what they can reasonably ask them to do can provide effective help. I remember how Balázs Kálmán, who could only have been six or eight years older than me, taught me to climb ropes. Running acrobatic classes along with Imre Baross, the director of the acrobat training school, was my friend Szöcske, and I can say that he was a better instructor than the older teachers, because if he told me, “Why are you so

afraid of a forward somersault? Don’t be silly. You can do it!” Then I went ahead and actually did it.

If we were to go back in time to 20 years ago to look at what acts were coming out of the acrobat training school and who the mentors of these artists were, we would see, for example, that the Hunor Junior group was taught by Károly Deltai, or I could even mention the Sallai Junior group, who spent several years in America with Ringling Brothers and were students of Mihály Sallai. Of course, this doesn’t mean that they were the only ones who taught the youngsters, as there were also others who came in to teach, but the really good acts that truly received international acclaim were put together by acrobats. At the time, we were training at the Hungária practice site, there were the elderly, retired acrobats who were the “rehearsal supervisors”. They were able to help us a lot, including by holding the safety line or intervening when the occasional heated exchange of words broke out under the pressure of the training session.

“Why are you shouting, Pityu? You’re the one who messed up!” Feri Kardos said to me at one such point, and I heeded the wisdom of his years and shut my mouth. By the way, Feri would also tell us things like, “Pay attention to how you get off the board! Don’t lift your feet up: wait for the pressure!” These comments were invaluable help to us young acrobats. A coach with no real knowledge, only a college degree, won’t say anything like this because he won’t notice what the student is actually doing. This is another problem I have with the current school and the state of acrobat training.

I would criticise this school back in my active acrobat days as well, even though back then it was still generating remarkable acts. From my class, for example, came the world-famous juggling team “The Five Villám”, Éva Vidos, Kálmán Balázs and my dear acrobat friend Szöcske, and I can also mention Imre Baross’s son Imike,

with his flying trapeze act, as well as our Hunor group with our horizontal bars act and the Kisfaludy group on the teeterboard.

I feel sorrow for our profession because the fresh blood is getting thinner. Perhaps now you understand what my problem is? The new generations coming up are simply not up to scratch! It has always made me feel bad to see this, and that's why I would pick on the school during my years as circus director as well. I scolded the principal at the time, telling her "Come and look at a school in Moscow or Ukraine! Take a look at how it should be done!"

Over all those years, I made sure to only deliver my criticism in private, because I always defended them in public and tried very hard to show everyone that we have a circus school too. I also always gave them the opportunity to have the student acrobats present the opening act at all our festivals. Once, I even managed to persuade László Varjasi to set up a circus tent in Felvonulási Square next to the City Park during the festival, where the students could perform before the international jury. I don't know how inspiring this ended up being for the kids, but perhaps what I thought was more important was for this opportunity to serve as encouragement for the principal and teachers, as it's up to them what professional skills an officially qualified young acrobat starts their career with. The training system at the circus school has been poor for a very long time. As a unique innovation, we Hungarians decided to set it up in imitation of the Russians. Except we did it badly. The Russians do not have an eight-year school, and they do not put two kids together in an act just because they are both 16 years old or in the same class.

I should note that what most of the world uses is studio-type education. My son set one up some years ago: this was the "MACIVA Master Studio" where he honed graduating circus students and young talents from sports and theatre (like Quinterion, Rolling

Wheel, Natália Demjén, Kata Kiss, Almost Trio, etc) into finished, marketable acts. Although MACIVA didn't think much of it – because it created a sort of competition with both the school and working artists for good quality contracts and status – the youngsters loved it, because Kristian was able to give them a strategy and encouragement: "Trust in it, do it, and you will have a fine act!" Such vision and confidence is very important in youth training!

The structure and operation of the school is very rigid, which makes it highly limited in professional terms. I find it very unfortunate that they receive state aid based on the number of students enrolled. That's why there are more and more of them. Soon they will start admitting children without any selection process at all. From what I understand, the student body already numbers about four hundred. I often cite elite sports as an example of a better model, since there this cannot happen, as only the top candidates are selected. Youth training should start with small steps. For this there is a process that bears discussion and even debate as to what should be changed and how. After that, it's also a big mistake not to check what becomes of the student after the ninth year. Most of the kids justifiably feel cheated later. Why? Because they leave the school at the age of 18 or 19, but no one will give them a contract. So they go on to work low-end jobs instead.

Once a girl greeted me politely in one of the big shopping malls in Budapest: "How are you doing today, Mr Kristóf?"

"And who might you be?" I responded. She turned out to be a former student at the circus school. After graduating, she and her group spent a year looking for a contract. But no luck. So they broke up, and she went on to sell ice cream. This kind of thing is no good at all! For me, say, it never would have occurred to me in my younger days to go and deliver pizza. Of course, I was born into the circus, and there was always an immediate opportunity to do work:

“If I can’t be an acrobat, then I’ll feed the elephant.” Meaning that my place was still there regardless. In any case, circus children know exactly what they want to become and start working toward it from an early age. In this respect, our lives are perhaps happier than those of “civilian” children, since we are, so to speak, already in our element at the circus. Of course, this doesn’t mean that it’s impossible to get in from the outside; at most it’s just harder. More support, nurturing of potential and mentoring are needed. For appropriate training, certain basic things should be clarified, such as what the acrobats are training for: to be team members for local productions, or freelance artists working across the world? Everyone should also be clear on how and where the youngsters will be able to use the skills they have spent years developing. How much demand is there on the market for the genres they have embraced? And this list of questions could go on much longer.

Now what I see is that the vocational training follows several different directions, which is not good, since the circus is not a theatre. If I’m studying for a career on the stage, then it is essential to master the craft of acting: to be able to recite poetry and prose, to practise speaking techniques, and it would also be useful to learn how to sing and dance, because then maybe I’ll be selected to join the cast of some dramatic or musical production. The emphasis in a performance-oriented acrobat training course is different.

In my opinion, the students should be put in a position as early on as possible to be able to decide what they want to do. I agree with the idea of the preliminary training programme, although to me four years seems like a bit much for this. However, at the end of this there should be a rigorous professional filtering entity that can honestly inform whomever needs to be informed whether a student is “suitable” or “unsuitable” for this career. This would also be the correct approach to take towards the child and the parents

as well, so that the youngster will have a chance to study something else that will bring them success in life.

The requirements in this profession are strict and must be met. For example, if your lower back isn’t flexible, you can’t do a contortionist act, no matter how much effort you put into it. You might reach a certain level, but will never get past it. You should do something else instead, find yourself another genre! Finding the right one is not easy. Like I said, this twelve-year-old should be given the chance to figure out what he likes to do. But how? Watch a lot of circus performances! Fifty years ago, it was still problematic to see as many shows as one wanted, because – at least in the Eastern bloc – travel was restricted and there was no internet. Today, however, if you are interested, we have every circus in the entire world available at the click of a button. Just enter the correct search terms into your browser and you can watch anyone’s show. This gives kids a chance to observe and research how the genres they feel drawn to have evolved over time: how it was done twenty years ago and what it has become today.

However much we speak about training the next generations, we must remain aware that this does not take place instantaneously, even if we send the student acrobats to, for example, China to train. And as long as we’re on the subject, it’s often said how wonderful Hungarian circus art is. We are ranked among the top five countries in this category, among the best in the world. This is great. That’s why I say that we have good teachers here, too. But if they insist on adopting Chinese techniques at any cost, then they should bring the instructor here instead so that the Hungarian teachers can also learn from him. The Chinese master will later return home, but the knowledge he passes on will remain here. What we created fifty years ago – because yes, my generation raised Hungarian circus art to a level on a par with the best in the world – should not be

lost! Of course, no one is interested these days in the opinions and experience of the elderly. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the way things are heading now, we are not going to remain in the top five. I can only tell you what I have experienced in life. If someone wants to be, say, a good aerialist, they really have to want it. “Civilians” cannot even imagine how much time is actually needed for someone to become a circus attraction. Let me tell you: it takes eight to ten years of gruelling work comprising several hours of practice a day, which results in ongoing development that lasts until the artist is 20 or 25 years old. And, if you’re good, the circus world will notice you. From the age of 30, the goal is to maintain the standard of the skills you have acquired and achieved so far, because at that point, the acrobat is no longer able to master new tricks. From then on, it’s a matter of making do with what you have.

It would be a good idea to construct a career model for them, and I also consider it important for the training to be production-centric. If someone wants to be an aerialist, give them the opportunity and do everything you can to help them do that. For example, I would offer support to private circuses and discuss with them the possibility of signing young Hungarian acrobats. They should be given a year or two after leaving school so that, say in the case of a team, for instance, they don’t split up right away. Give them a bit of a chance, telling them, “Since you’ve been doing this for years of your life, now you’ll get a little more time to develop in a travelling circus.”

They should have as much time as it takes for a fledgeling acrobat to learn in practice: to face the audience and run over to the little kid in the auditorium who is reaching out his hand. And these things cannot be explained in school, but must be experienced in real life. This is the opportunity that young people should be given. I say open the curtains for them as soon as possible, because the future of the circus is at stake!

Life is a lot harder for circus artists now than it used to be, because there are fewer job opportunities. I don’t know what will happen after the Covid-19 pandemic passes, but one fears that the few available spaces will become even fewer. The market will shrink. I agree with my son when he says that quality will become more and more crucial. And it grieves me that in the past eight to ten years, little care has been taken to ensure the quality of young acts coming out of the circus training school or the private circus world to replace the old ones. The Hungarian circus artists that are recognised at the international level are from the Richter family, and there are perhaps even a few others whose families were circus people and who I’d say could survive on the international market. But international agents and directors no longer queue up to sign Hungarian artists, like they used to. Unfortunately, we have to acknowledge the fact that the audience for circuses has declined worldwide over the last twenty years. And this loss of viewership is a very big problem, because it has all kinds of effects. The smaller the audience, the less the revenue, and what little money comes in the artists will spend on supporting themselves rather than further developing their acts.

The other important factor that affects, and will continue to affect, the audience is the question of “animal acts or no animal acts”. Returning visitors have always loved the traditional circus, so they buy tickets again and again. However, the growing protests by animal rights activists are impacting everyone. If tomorrow or the day after wild animal acts are banned here too, one fears that we will

lose even the few spectators we still have now. As for what a circus that wishes to be, what I would call, eternal will then end up largely in the hands of politicians responsible for culture, whether we like this fact or not. But circus directors and acrobat training schools also share the same responsibility. The circus must evolve to meet the needs of the audience. And this, as I said earlier, can only be ensured by a reliable supply of adequately trained young artists.

In any case, circuses have always worked this way. If we go back in time to, say, a century ago, we'll see that even then circus companies had to adapt to the audience. Back then, when the Czech company of Cirkus Kludsky came to Hungary, they brought twenty elephants with them, along with polar bears and giraffes, because that's what the audience wanted to see. This is why they came to the show. If the display of wild animals is restricted or banned here too in the future, the circus should serve the remaining audience in such a way that continues to provide recreation, joy and entertainment. This will not be an easy task!

I think that circuses will survive; it's just that new markets will open up. I would cite Asia, for example, as still being virgin territory in this respect. Circuses are now opening even in China, which essentially has no circus culture, especially when we look at the consumer market side of it. Chinese acrobatic training schools prepare some acrobats for the Chinese opera and others for holiday events. Up until recently, there had only been a single building there, in the city of Wuhan, that is spherical in structure and something we could call a circus. By contrast, they too now hold festivals in several cities and operate both permanent circuses and tent circuses (mostly in leisure parks) because of the growing interest in family entertainment there. In reality, the circus is a European genre that originated in England and spread to the rest of the world from there. Nowadays I feel like we're on a bit of a downward slope. If the le-

vel of quality is adequate, people will retain the desire to enjoy the live show, because they want to be amazed and say, "Damn, look at what that aerial gymnast can do!" and "How did that juggler learn to do that?" This has been understood for some time by the French, Russians, Ukrainians and Canadians, and learned more recently by the Belgians, Swedes and Finns. Even some African countries, like Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania have joined the competition. They are all educating the next generation of circus performers in effective school systems.

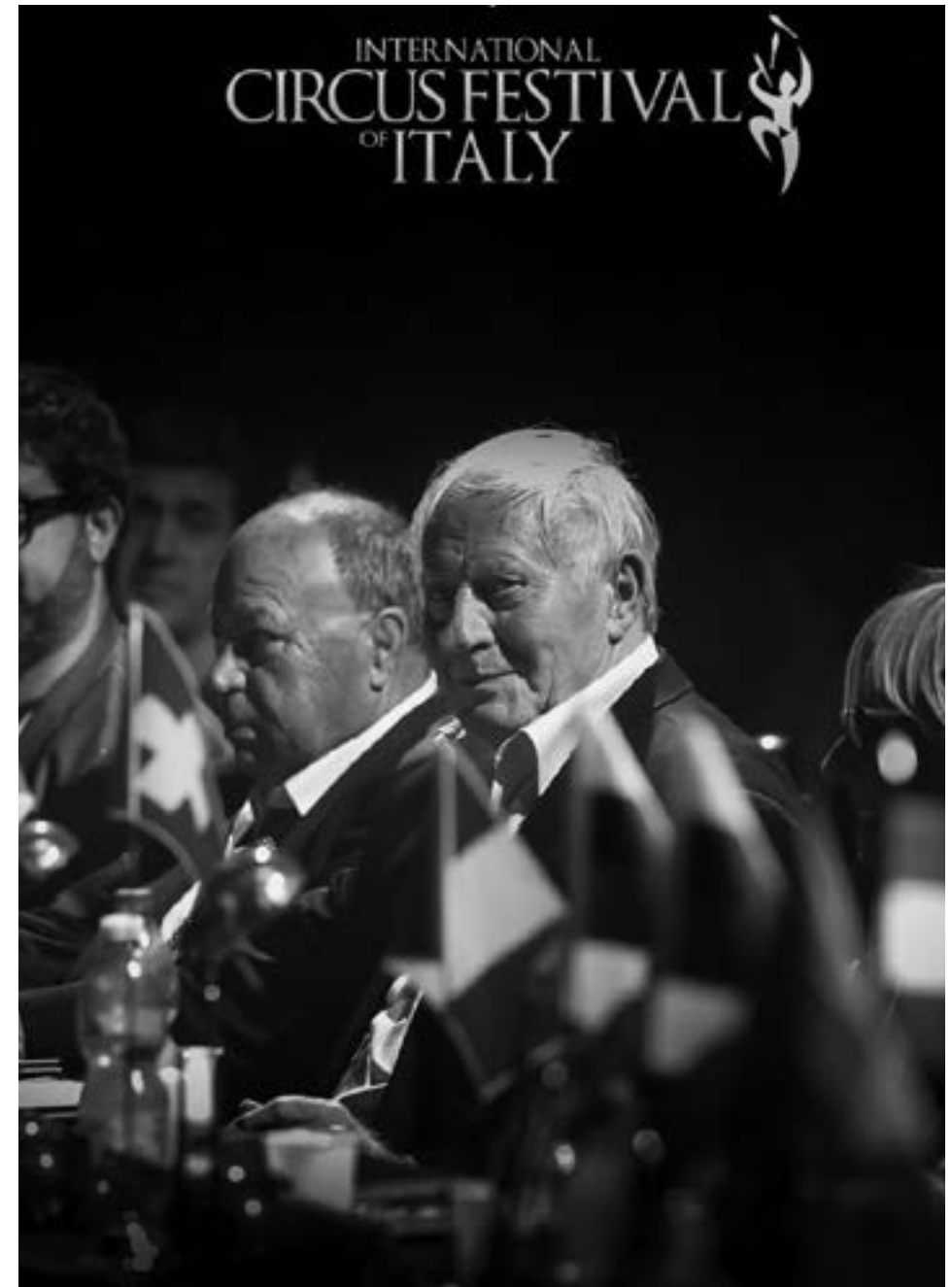
Although I've left this to the end, I don't want to forget the clowns, either, because they are some of the most important participants. And, unfortunately, good clowns are in short supply. How did it work in the old days? A dwarf, or in today's terminology a "little person", would come on and sing a few verses, and that would be enough to get the people laughing. But this era is over! Today's audience no longer finds it funny to see someone fall over after being kicked in the bottom. Well, maybe little kids still giggle at the sight. But children are also changing, as more people nowadays find their red noses and heavily made-up faces frightening. They weren't so scared back then.

Maybe if Charlie Rivel, the truly classic clown who also took home a Gold Clown Award from the first Monte Carlo International Circus Festival, were to take the ring today, people might just watch in puzzlement, saying "What is this?" and perhaps no longer understanding his humour. But I could have mentioned another name, like the elder Fumagalli, with whom I myself even worked and who also featured in Fellini's film *I clown*. Fumagalli's son, Gianni Huesca, is still one of the finest characters clowns in the world today. My great favourite is David Larible, whom I've known since he started working as a clown. In the beginning, everyone at Circus Krone was still making mocking him, but I encouraged David and told

him, “Don’t stop. You’re good. Keep doing what you’re doing!” By the way, David still remembers this and is grateful for it. When the audience stood to applaud him at the Sochi festival a few years ago, at the end of his one-man theatre show, he singled me out: “I want to say something, a thank you. Because sitting here with us today is the man who got me started and encouraged me to be a clown!” What did I see in him in the beginning? Beauty, kindness. I’ve always liked the handsome clowns who can communicate everything with their eyes: when he looks at me, kindness radiates from him. Of course, everything is relative, since here we also have Housch-Ma-Housch, whom I like even though I can’t see his eyes for all the makeup he wears. Yet I still like him, because his odd style of speech, sooner or later, never fails to grab the audience’s attention. It grabbed mine too. At any rate, although character clowns have evolved a great deal over the last fifty years, what has remained unchanged is the fact that their humour is needed at the circus, meaning that clowns will still have work in the future. Their repertoires should be whatever pleases the audience and makes them laugh, because at the circus, the spectators’ wishes always come first!

Honestly, I don’t envy today’s generation at all, because they have it much harder than we did. The world has been transformed, and the network of agents who had an exclusive impact on the circus world, such as Franco Medini – the one who would tell a Krone director, “This act is really super. Let’s sign it!” – have already disappeared, to be replaced by the internet. Today, a director just Googles “acrobatic duo” and gets fifty hits to choose from. True, on the one hand, we can concede what an advantage this is, but on the other hand, it is a disadvantage, because when something is abundant, its value diminishes, and the price will go down. This means that competition in the world circus market is increasing.

The world is changing.



As the chairman of the jury at Latina Festival (2018)



With Leonid Kostyuk and Urs Pils at our joint 70th birthday celebration in the ring of Circus Nikulin (2011)



With Prince Rainier III of Monaco as a member of the jury at the 27th Monte Carlo Festival

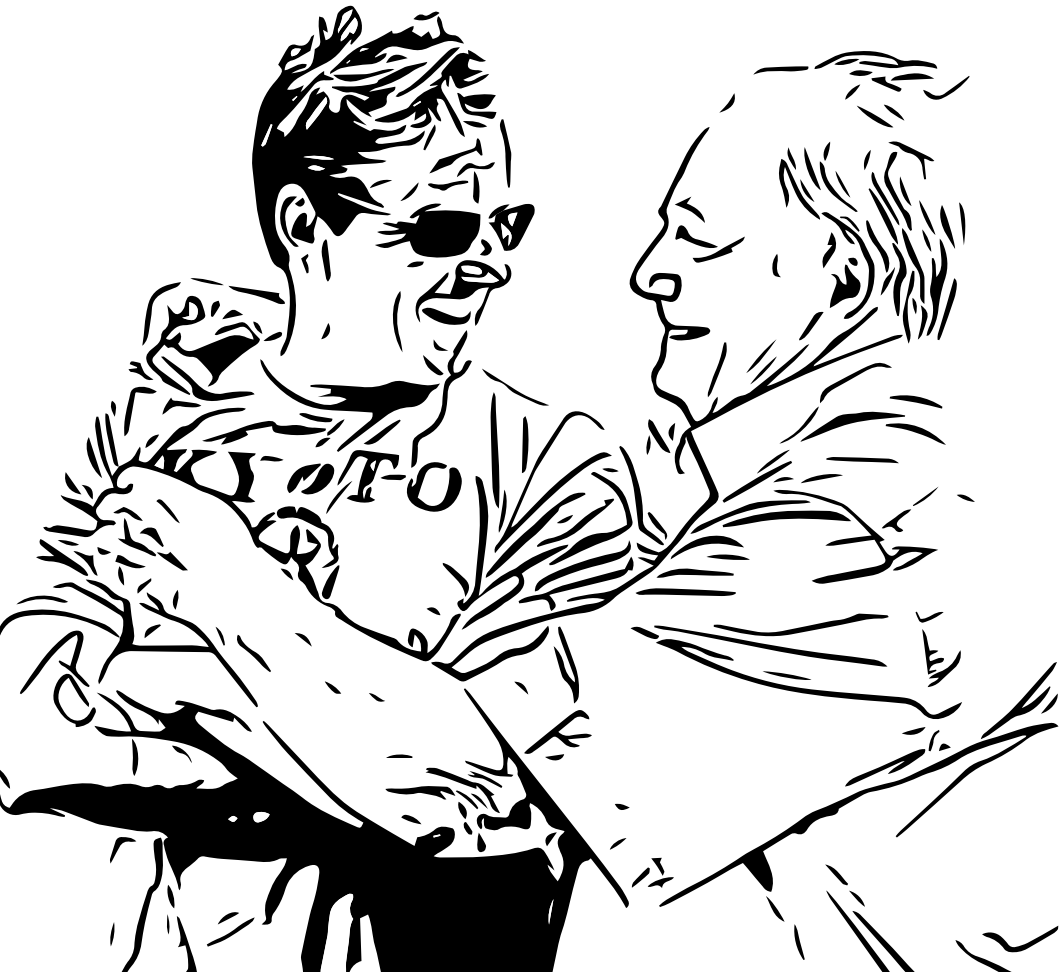


Receiving the Pushkin Prize from Vladimir Putin (2005)



Feri Tihany with Noella at the Capital Circus of Budapest (2005)

CHAPTER
FIVE



WE WERE TOGETHER EVEN WHEN WE WERE APART

I would have liked for my son to have taken my place at the Capital Circus of Budapest. My wish was for continuity, because at the circus, they don't change directors every five years like at a theatre. Moreover, this continuity involves a kind of connection, a relationship based on mutual trust that cannot be built in two or three years. And it can't be purchased with money either.

I was even preparing for Kristian to take his place in the director's chair and started shifting some of the burdens of circus work onto him years ahead of time. I trained him like an apprentice and threw him into different situations, taking him to sharp-edged meetings, sitting him down next to me on the jury of international festivals to discuss and compare our assessments, and afterwards he would be present at the jury's professional battles as well. I have been asked to solve communication and management problems many times. He would have been my perfect successor, one whom I know would have taken proper care of the Hungarian circus, with the same professional values and commitment to the circus as I had. I knew he would have looked after the Capital Circus like his own child, even when I was no longer there.

We have a very special relationship. I will never forget the moment when my wife came out of the doctor's surgery and told me I was going to be a father.

We didn't plan to have Kristian. Ili and I were young and, to be frank, both of us were a bit on the wild side: we liked to enjoy our lives and have fun, so unlike other newlyweds, we didn't want child-

ren right away. I can say that we enjoyed a carefree existence, as we had a good reputation in the profession. We worked all the time and had contracts for years in advance. Many people around us shook their heads and said we should think about tomorrow as well, but we didn't listen to anyone. If we had a contract abroad and travelled over to Italy with two suitcases, a few years later we came home with the same two suitcases, nothing more. Was this youthful irresponsibility? No, even with hindsight today, I don't think so because there's nothing to regret. The way we lived then was good. This is how our years together passed pleasantly as we travelled around half the world; until the moment we found out that Ili was pregnant.

We happened to be in Italy, and to this day, I remember the name of the small town: Faenza. My Ilike was feeling an odd sensation and asked me to take her to a gynaecologist. The doctor who examined her had more to say besides the good news. (Which in that one sudden moment shelved all the plans we had from then on.)

"What's your occupation?" the doctor asked. "I'm with the circus. An acrobat," Ili replied. The doctor's eyes widened at this, and he told my wife she had to stop working because she was going to have a baby, and it was a high-risk pregnancy. There was no question that we should end the tour immediately. We went back to the circus and told the director, Liana Orfei, that we wanted this baby to be born. We were lucky, because she liked us very much, and everyone was happy for us. She didn't create the slightest difficulty and let us go by mutual agreement. We travelled home to Hungary and were very happy.

Being blessed with a child is always a joyous thing, but it brings serious changes to an acrobat's life. In 1969, when we learned that my son was on the way, I was 26 years old, and Ili was 23. In our profession, this period is the most active, as our careers do not last

until we reach 60. In many cases, even 35 or 40 is already considered old. In plain language, the clock is ticking, so missing a year is a lot of time out of an acrobat's career. Thus, in retrospect, maybe this might have been the reason why I was so tough with Ili. At the time, I could only see how obese she was, as she gained nearly twenty kilos during her pregnancy. I was a young and successful acrobat, so I naturally thought that we had to continue after the birth. Yes, I know it sounds harsh, but that's the way our lives are. Acrobats plan for years in advance, and we already had a contract for December, and with the Cirque d'Hiver Bouglione, no less!

I knew that she would not be able to perform with so much excess weight. My poor Ilike, and once she became ill. We were at a butcher's shop when she told me to grab her, because she felt like she was about to faint. Later, at home, she said it was hunger that had made her feel so unwell. From then on, I never again told her to refrain from eating. In fact, I encouraged her, saying "Eat something, Darling! That's the most important thing. Don't worry about dieting. We'll go back to that after our child is born!"

It's interesting how certain moments can engrave themselves on human memory. Even now, the day when Kristian was born remains vividly alive in my mind. "Pityu! We have to go!" said Ili on that June morning. Although her suitcase was already packed, and we had organised everything at the hospital well in advance, I was so nervous that I started to panic. Ili had to calm me down. Then, as we left for the hospital, she lost her composure too.

"What's wrong?" I asked her. "It's two weeks early," she answered, sniffing, "It must be a girl!"

At that time, several members of the Hunor group already had children, and strangely enough, with things turning out similarly: Szöcske's first child was a boy, then my sister also gave birth to her

first child, a son, and Gabi Hunfi also had a son. We were next, and we had no idea if we were going to have a boy or a little girl.

My God, such excitement! We thought that when we reached the hospital, everything would go smoothly. We were relatively calm by then, because we had arranged the doctor for Ili in advance, and not just any doctor: we had gone straight for the chief physician! Then, when we got to the Szabolcs Street Hospital, we were told that the chief physician wasn't there. "No problem!" I told the nurse, "Phone him!" The issue just seemed so simple to me. It turned out that the doctor was giving a lecture in Debrecen – over 200 kilometres from Budapest. "Not to worry. I'll go and pick him up!" I offered with great pride, being the owner of a Mercedes 300 coupe. "For God's sake! Don't go anywhere," shouted the nurse. "By the time you get there, your wife will already have given birth!" This is how Ili ended up with a young doctor, whose name I still remember: Dr Benyó. The delivery room was upstairs, so I waited downstairs in the atrium: they wouldn't let me inside. Honestly, I didn't even mind, because I wasn't keen on the idea of fathers being present for childbirth anyway. I waited and waited, and then suddenly a small, nasty nurse appeared, with a bundle of swaddling in her arms.

"So, what is it you wanted?" she asked me. I was so flustered I didn't know what to say. "Well, here he is: hold him. You have a son!" And with that, she pushed Kristian into my hands. Some moments in a person's life are unforgettable. For me, this was one of them. At that time, it was still possible to take flowers to hospitals, so whenever I arrived, the nurses would announce, "Here's Daddy with a hundred roses!" Recently, in an interview, Kristian jokingly told the reporter, "Unlike my father, who came into the world in a circus caravan, I was born in a hospital, but I did end up going home to a caravan!" And indeed he did. We were living in a caravan in my

father's yard: that was where we were living at the time, and that was where we took our son home to from the hospital.

We didn't become 'normal' parents afterwards either, which is why we soon found ourselves facing the first serious problem too. Since an acrobat's existence is in the circus ring, Ili wanted to get back to work as soon as possible. She started training and working out, and because of this, she didn't have enough milk. The paediatrician and the nurse both came to examine what was making my otherwise perfectly healthy son cry constantly.

"The baby is hungry because the breast milk he's nursing on doesn't contain enough nutrients," they said. Fortunately, there was a solution to this at that time: we ended up buying breast milk for Kristian from another nursing mother. That's how we acrobats are: we never rest. Although we had a child, our lives continued as they had before, only now our son also became a part of our everyday life. After the problem with the breast milk was resolved, life returned almost to normal. Ili attended to the baby while we practised hard. (That's when we tried out the new prop, the swing, with the Hunor group.)

Time was tight because we had to leave shortly afterwards to honour contracts in Russia and Austria. Kristian was only five months old at the time, and we couldn't take him with us, as the Russian winter is a trying ordeal even for adults. It was hellishly difficult leaving our son at home. Our only consolation was that we had left him in the best possible hands, as my mother was looking after him. We were away for three months, and even though everything was fine at home, Ili suffered terribly from being parted from her little boy.

As the years passed and our son grew older, it was a relief to be able to take him with us. There was enough space in the caravan we lived in during the tours to comfortably accommodate a child

too. The baby had a crib in the front, and Ili and I slept in the back, where our bedroom was. Kristian was a very adaptable child.

He knew from an early age that an hour before the performance, he could no longer go to Mum saying, "I'm hungry" or "I have to pee". He was aware that when Ili was preparing for a show, she had to be left alone and undisturbed. Kristian learned how to work the television quite early on, so we could prepare for the performances. Then, later, when he was older, he also got a tape recorder. We taught him Sándor Petőfi's famous poem "My Mother's Hen", which he recited or sang, and sometimes he pretended he was the circus ringmaster. Then he liked to listen to his own voice played back from the tape recorder. God, how we laughed: he had such a cute, chirpy voice! I still remember – I can almost hear it audibly in my mind – the way he always put the emphasis at the end of the sentence, as he mimicked what he heard and saw at the circus. These moments are also among my eternal memories!

At any rate, Kristian was not a demanding child, and he always knew what he could ask of us. In the company he grew up with, by the way, in the courtyard of the circus in front of the caravan, he only met children who were like him. They didn't need branded products yet back in those days. It was a different world.

Children growing up in a circus are different from "civilian" children. In my opinion, they are much more responsible than their peers. From a very young age, they know and follow the written and unwritten rules of the circus, such as the fact that the backstage area is forbidden territory when the show is underway. Even so, if a very young child were to attempt to follow his parents, an older one would grab him and stop him from going any further. Circus kids don't even notice these rules: they just grow into them and know the boundaries. In the initial phase of our mobile lifestyle, school didn't present any problem either, because we took

the textbooks with us, and Ili taught our son the curriculum for the first two years. There was no trouble. Everything went smoothly, except for the fact that, owing to many stays abroad, Kristian was not mastering the Hungarian language to the level we would have liked. Even though we spoke Hungarian within the family, as soon as he set foot outside the caravan, he would talk to the other children in German or Italian. (Later on, back in Budapest, we were very lucky with the primary school on Hermina Road, because Ms Inci, one of the teachers there, spoke German, so it was no problem if Kristian answered in German when he was answering a question and the correct word in Hungarian escaped his mind at the moment.)

My son was always an obedient child. He also understood that a tour turns out sometimes to require him to stay at home with his grandparents. We didn't have to repeatedly explain the reason for this, and he never threw tantrums, because he understood why he couldn't come with us. We trusted him, and he trusted us, for we were together even when we were apart. There was so much trust between us that when he was 16 years old, we gave him access to our bank account. We raised him to be sincere and honest, and to this day, I know that whenever my son says anything to me, it's the truth and it's correct. I'd swear on it with my life!

Circus life soon taught Kristian diligence as well. He was only in his third year at primary school, maybe eight years old, when we had to leave home, but we told him that if did well at school, he could come and join us for a short break. The condition for all this, of course, was that he had to be doing well at school. As Kristian really wanted to come and see us, he studied hard. So we sent him a plane ticket to come and visit for Christmas! The only catch was that he had to make the trip alone. There was no direct flight to Sicily from Hungary at the time, so he had to change planes in Rome

– transferring from the old international airport to the domestic airport – but I trusted my son and knew he wouldn't get lost.

We asked for an escort at the airport, of course, but he basically travelled alone all the way. “Your son certainly has spirit!” the escort told us later, “He complained to us that his dad had paid for an escort, ‘So where is she?’” I was proud of my son. I think this journey encouraged him to be independent and courageous. Of course, I didn't make my son travel alone then because I was so smart and wise. Far from it! It was simply impossible for us to come home for him because we didn't have that much money. Furthermore, I would not have been able to take time off. As a circus, we also had to work over Christmas. We had performances to do. Kristian had to be willing to make the trip alone so that we could be together.

I was afraid for him. You bet I was afraid! But I trusted that he could do it. As a result, he became an independent person early on. By the age of 20, he had already travelled alone to work in North America and Central America before going on to Southeast Asia, and we didn't see him for years. He travelled the world without any problems and held his own everywhere he went.

There is another story that also demonstrates our perhaps unique sense of perception and attitude towards others. In 1984, we were signed to do a programme entitled “Three Generations in the Ring”. Since my father was still alive, he bent an iron rod. Then Ili and I came out to do our teeterboard routine. Finally Kristian followed, with a little juggling act. By the way, this was the first time that Kristian had performed at the Capital Circus. It was a huge thing! He had music written for it, and we also had a costume sewn for him: a lot of preparation went into this joint show. We practised a lot. “That's not the way you come into the ring! Do it again!” Ili instructed Kristian, who almost burst into tears because he had already been sent back by his mother ten or fifteen

times. “Make your entrance from the curtain again!” Sounds strict? Perhaps. However, we circus people know how important that moment is, when the curtain opens, and we have to head out into the middle of the ring. This is a complex thing and not easy to explain. The artist has to enter in such a way that exudes naturalness and respect for the audience with his every move while still remaining himself. That is, you have to pay attention to your posture, the way you walk, in fact, every single step you take! Because if you’re an acrobat, you can run in. But if you’re playing a ballerina, you have to “fly” into the ring. If you’re portraying a gentleman, though, then you have to walk in so elegantly that no one can take their eyes off you.

So the only thing Kristian had to do was make his entrance. Why wasn’t Ili satisfied? Because she wanted to coax the best out of her son, and so she treated him with a firm hand. However, this kind of “professional” severity has never driven a wedge between us. In fact, it did our son good and defines his attitude to work to this day. “Work well and precisely, like a star moves in the sky”, as the poem by Attila József goes. He became an independent, hardworking person. I am very proud of him!

I have another story. There’s a letter that Ili kept... In 1987, our son was just preparing for his final secondary school exams when Ili suffered the terrible accident I described before. Kristian was immediately excused from school so he could come and join us, as we all wanted to be together at this time. He stayed with us for a week, then had to return to school. Ili stayed in the hospital for another four and a half months. Not long afterwards, I received a letter from the teacher of my son’s class. She wrote that we should be proud of Kristian, because he was keeping up with his schoolwork even in those difficult times.

Enough about my son for now.

Ili and I always adored being around children. When Kristian got older and had to remain in Budapest for his education, and there were children around whatever circus we happened to be working at, we always found a favourite. I remember on one of our tours in Italy, there was a little boy named Jodi. He must have been around two years old, and he came and knocked on our door at the campsite every morning, asking for a sweet: “Caramello, caramello!” It was very cute. Then time passed, and our son had grown up into a fine young man. Except I was already 60 years old, and we still did not have a grandchild. So I told Kristian, “It doesn’t matter where you get one from, just do it!” Sure, I was joking at the time, but all joking aside, I really longed to be a grandpa.

I adored Noella even while she was still in her mother’s womb. There are some very beautiful moments in my life that will last forever, and Noella’s birth in 2004 was one of these. My son was in the Caribbean, working on a cruise ship, but he asked for time off the week my granddaughter was due and flew home. The days passed, but Noella just didn’t want to be born. Time was getting tight because Kristian only had a limited amount of holiday. But by then, we already knew that Noella would be a special little girl!

Then the moment came at last! My son was inside the delivery room, and Ili and I were cheering them on from the hospital corridor, keeping in touch with Kristian by phone. I still remember how terribly excited I was: “Why isn’t this damn phone ringing yet?” I was im-

patient because I couldn't wait for it to ring. My first encounter with my granddaughter was a beautiful moment. I can still vividly remember seeing the door to the maternity ward opening in front of me, and there was my son, with the baby in a bundle of swaddling in his arms. This is an incredibly important moment in my life: seeing my son cradling my granddaughter against his chest.

My relationship with Noella has been a very special one from the beginning. She spent a good deal of time in my lap as a little baby because, whenever I held her, she calmed down. I believe it was only in my presence that she would remain quiet. From a young age, she spent a lot of time with us. Whenever we could, Ili and I had her stay with us, and she even had her own room in our house. Of course, it's still hers, and even though she's now a big girl, her stickers are still where she stuck them with her little hands. I still have fond memories of the breakfasts and happy dinners we had together. We always had games to play and mischief to make. My God, how we laughed! I'll tell you something, but first I should mention that my wife was a great cook. Once, before one of our lunches, Ili jokingly asked Noella, "Come and taste the food, because if I haven't done a good job, I'm going to be kicked out of the house!" Noella was still tiny, so she took what her grandma told her very seriously. She tasted the food and then looked at me with a severe face: "So what happens to Grandma now, Grandpa?" I waved my hands dismissively and said, "Ah, the dinner wasn't too bad, after all, so I'm not kicking her out just yet. Maybe I'll let her stay."

Exchanges like this always resulted in everyone rolling around with laughter; we had a lot of fun doing things like that! Probably Noella has forgotten these episodes by now, as they happened so long ago, but I remember each and every one of them. They gave me so much joy. Noella even came with Ili and me when we went to work at the Capital Circus. My God, what a lot of fun we had

playing in my director's office. She was the tiger, and I was the hunter, and we crawled around on the floor. When Noella climbed under my desk, I chased after her, since I was a hunter and had to catch her. "Just imagine if someone saw this! A 65-year-old man on all fours under his desk!" Ili would laugh, but I didn't care what anyone might think. All that mattered was that my granddaughter and I were having a ball. Perhaps I keep saying this, but Noella and I have always had a special and intimate relationship, or at least that's the way I feel. It's no exaggeration to say that it feels like being in love! Of course, this is something that people only understand when they become grandparents themselves, and their grandchild caresses them and says, "I love you Grandpa!" Frankly, does any grandparent need anything more than this? I will do anything for her, even if I am aware that what I am doing is not the best idea, and I will end up "getting told off" by my son. Yes, I know I shouldn't, but I still go and buy my granddaughter whatever she wants, because if Noella smiles at me, and I see she's happy, that makes me happy too! And at my age, it's very important to have someone to love so much. Of course, I really love my son too, but he's already an adult, an independent person. Noella, well... she's quite different! I've tried to explain this to my son too, so that he'll understand why I do it. "I know I'm spoiling her but try to look at it from my point of view and try to understand me. Leave the two of us in peace!" It must also have something to do with the fact that I received a strange upbringing from my father. I learned from him that if he gave something, he would not ask for anything in return. Meaning, the only reason for giving anything is out of love. And there is something else here. The truth is, maybe the reason why I've "spoilt" my granddaughter is because I had the feeling that, because of her parents' divorce, I had to give her everything I thought she wasn't getting. Excuse me for doing "stupid things"

that everyone else opposes. That's when I explain to Noella, "You know, Grandpa is being foolish with you right now, so we should come up with a way to get away with it, and quickly too." Then we have a good laugh.

No matter how many years pass, I look after her now as much as I did when she was a little child. I go to her school events whenever I can, and when she did sport, I was always there for her competitions. Her early schooling was very important, because I wanted her to get a quality education, and luckily, I had a say in that as Grandpa. Nowadays, orthodontics is my job because I want her smile to be beautiful. To tell the truth, when I started going to the dentist with her, I still thought that my granddaughter would be an acrobat and needed a nice smile in the ring. Later, however, I realised that my Noella would never become an acrobat. Why? Because she doesn't have enough talent or perseverance – without them, there's no point, and it's not worth it, because it won't bring her any pleasure. Even though her mother, Anette Dezamits, was also an acrobat, I have to face the fact that Noella is a different type of person. With me, there was never any question that I would become a circus artist, just as it was clear that my son would also choose this profession. Because he was born into it and had seen the circus around him all his life. But Noella wasn't born into the circus, so she didn't grow up in it, although she spent a lot of time with us at the Capital Circus and loved visiting it. When she was little, we played a lot of acrobatic games; we still even have the little rug we spread out in our living room for her to present her acrobatic choreographies on. We pretended that I was the jury, scoring her stunts. I admit that I had a hard time accepting that Noella would never be a professional acrobat. For a while, she did pursue artistic gymnastics. I took her to her class many times and, of course, I saw what she was doing. I saw her struggling, but I couldn't lie to myself. I also

saw that if she didn't clearly succeed at something, she would lose interest and give up. My granddaughter is not an easy character, but I know she's not to blame for a lot of things. I am very proud of her because she is a good student and speaks English at a native level! She has a different path in life. One thing is certain: as long as I'm alive, I will encourage her to find herself and her profession in life. I'll try to make her understand that she should find a job she loves, just as we were also happy to be doing what we loved best. (It's true that we suffered for it, but there was always a good feeling afterwards.) Of course, that's what you say, because that's what you have to tell a seventeen-year-old, and then I can only hope that years later she will remember at least a sentence or two of what I've told her. But I know what Grandpa says is important to her! I still have a very good relationship with Noella, even though she is gradually growing into a woman. "I love you, Grandpa! I love you so much! Take care of yourself!" That's what she always tells me, before going back to pushing buttons on her phone, but I understand this too, just as I remember that I was once a teenager myself as well!

I have a secret alliance with Noella. "Grandpa, you know everything about me. Well, almost everything..." she said to me once, and I think she really does tell me her secrets most of the time. I think even more than she tells her mother or father. She also listens patiently to my advice. Of course, she doesn't always accept it, but I don't expect her to. We discussed one thing when she was very young, which has been the most important rule between us ever since: I asked her never to lie to me. "Whatever shit you get into, always tell me about it, because if you tell me something's gone wrong, we'll try to sort it out somehow. It's important for me to trust you, and if you say something, I want to believe it. But I will only believe you if you never lie!" I told her. And then comes Grandpa's wisdom: since I want her to follow our rule, I never ask

her a “delicate” question. Because I know there are questions that I, at her age, would have answered with lies too.

I am very happy that Noella was born. She is very important to me, and I get a lot of beautiful things from her. I know she’s a big girl now, but I still put a pack of her favourite sweets - Tic Tacs or those round white mints - in my car, in the little holder on the door. When she gets into the car and finds it, she always bursts out laughing. I don’t know how much I’m going to figure in her later life and thoughts. The fact is, however, that ever since she was born, she has made me happy. Someone once remarked how lucky Noella was to have such a grandfather, to which I laughingly responded, “Grandpa is lucky to have Noella!”

We circus people don’t like the wind. While it’s true that the surface area of the tent is quite large, it still moves even in the slightest breeze, and I can honestly say it was not a great pleasure to work under it during stormy weather. Especially when the wind was strong, because the tent had to be further secured to prevent any problems! At such times, in spots where the ground was soft, we stood around and beat in extra stakes with large hammers, and then pulled the ropes to make the tent wallings as tight as possible. Fortunately, the circus has developed a great deal since then, and this isn’t nearly as big a problem as it was 40 or 50 years ago. Nowadays, the tents are made of very strong material and come in various shapes, so they can withstand large storms with winds of 100-120 kilometres per hour. Of course though, it’s much better if the wind is not blowing at all.

Decades later, after we had stopped working as acrobats, whenever it was raining outside and the wind was blowing, Ili and I would look at each other and say, “Isn’t it nice that we don’t have to work right now! Isn’t it nice that we don’t have to put on our wellies with our costumes, pull on a raincoat and carefully head for the back of the tent so our clothes don’t get muddy, then take off our warm robes and warm up in the wet weather? Isn’t it nice that we don’t have to hop around in the damn cold any more?” It is true that we suffered a great deal of adversity, but we also felt plenty of joy in life! The circus has never felt like work to me. For example, when someone gets up at six in the morning and goes into a factory to assemble cars – that’s work. But the fact that I work in the circus from morning to night, that is, scrubbing the animals, getting their feed, sweeping the sawdust, practising and performing – that isn’t work, because for us, this is what

the wonderful circus life is all about! It is a sense of life that is freedom itself! When Ili and I had everything we wanted from life and were no longer working as acrobats, my plan was to buy myself an old caravan. There are even a few that were never sold off and are now rotting away, disused, at MACIVA's Cinkota site. For a long time, I had this desire to buy one and have a carpenter refurbish it for me. I had no particular plans for it, in any case, just to bring it into the garden and sleep in it occasionally. Ili said I was mad, and she was right, because I really am a bit eccentric. However, few people know what a wonderful feeling it is to sleep in a caravan when the rain is falling outside. The soft knocking that you hear then is music to my ears.

I miss the Capital Circus. I will always miss the successful performances and the applause: my whole life was the circus. Of course, I don't want to complain, because I've derived a lot of joy from life. I have every reason to be a happy person: I have a great son who happens to have found a life partner in an aerial acrobat – life is interesting this way. I really love Nati. It's reassuring that they are doing well and living a balanced life. It also makes my granddaughter happy, whom I wish much success in life.

How do I spend my days now? I'm retired and a grandpa, one who still gets a little fun out of life here and there. For example, I was at the market yesterday and bought cocoa almonds for Nati and Noella at the artisanal shop, as well as some cherries, because I know they love them. I often visit my son and his family: they cook well, and we eat a lot and talk. Then, because there can be no dinner without good wine, I sleep there too, I even have a separate room at their place, and the next day I go home after we have had breakfast together. Sometimes I feel almost overwhelmed by their care, because when I'm there, they hover around me like Ili and I did on the occasions we had Noella with us. I feel lucky, because I don't have any financial problems, and even though I'm getting older,

I'm not a burden on anyone. Nor do I wish to be. I think I inherited this from my own dad. It would be so wonderful if Ili were still here. She would cook something good to eat, and then we would play cards after lunch. She would always win, of course, but only because she cheated. But I wouldn't say anything, because I didn't mind. It's been three years since she passed away.

All in all, I've had a very beautiful life. I've had many successes that I really wanted and for which I worked, fought and struggled. I have received countless accolades in the world of the circus. People who are important in the profession respect me and listen to me, even today. My circle of friends isn't that big, but they're important to me. For example, I sometimes sit down with Szandi Eötvös for a good lunch, and I have been friends with Urs Pilz for over forty years. We still have a great time together: we drink whisky, we smoke cigars and watch circus performances. There is a kind of trust between us, and we always discuss our thoughts on professional matters. I travel to him or he comes to Hungary, and we also often meet at festivals in Latina, or Moscow, or even in China. Maybe now that we finally seem to be passing the peak of this pandemic, I can trust that I'll need my dinner suit again. When? If festivals resume, let's say in Latina or Monte Carlo. I guess it also shows that even though I'm 80, I still live at the circus. Our career is a beautiful one and full of many things: recognition, success, failures and tragedies large and small. There is nothing wrong with these either, as they are all elements of it. Then the day comes when we have to stop, but it still remains a part of our lives forever.

I still have my trunk and travel bag ready to go in the corner of the room, and I'm still waiting for the contract, when to pack, when to head off... If I could live a hundred times, I wouldn't choose anything but the life of a circus artist.

Because this is the most beautiful life!



With Noella, Üröm (2020)



With Kristian, New Zealand (1978)



Participating in an "extraordinary" online jury with Kristian for the 21st Latina Circus Festival (2020)



Noella's 12th birthday (2016)



With Noella in the director's office (2009)



Like and Noella, Űröm (2010)



With Noella at a new film release of Dumbo (2019)

(photo credit: Ádám Urbán)



With Nati at the Monte Carlo Circus Festival (2015)



In my office at the Capital Circus of Budapest (2010)

Acrobatic Career (principle engagements)

1958 – Sport Circus / Richter Circus (summer season) - Hungary
1959 – Globus Circus (summer season) - Bulgaria
1960 – Capital Circus of Budapest “Hiller Girls” - Hungary
1961 – Hungarian National Circus tour - Czechoslovakia
1962 – Hungarian National Circus tour - Bulgaria
1963 – Hungarian National Circus tour:
 Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Yugoslavia
1964 – Circo Liana, Nando & Rinaldo Orfei tour - Italy
1965 – Circo Liana, Nando & Rinaldo Orfei tour - Italy
1966 – Circo Liana, Nando & Rinaldo Orfei tour - Italy
1967 – ATA Wien Stadthalle - Vienna, Austria
1967 – Circus Williams (summer season) - West Germany
1967 – Circo Liana, Nando & Rinaldo Orfei tour - Italy
1968 – Circo Liana, Nando & Rinaldo Orfei tour - Italy
1969 – SojuzGosCirk (Penza, Kemerovo) - USSR
1970 – Elfi Althoff Jacobi “Hungarian National Circus” tour
 (as leader of the company) - Austria
1970 – Circo Moira Orfei (winter season) - Italy
1971 – Circo Moira Orfei (summer season) - Italy
1971 – Benneweis Bau Circus - Denmark
1971 – Kelvin Hall Circus - Scotland
1972 – Capital Circus of Budapest “Gala Show ’72” - Hungary
1972 – Apollo Circus tour - Hungary
1973 – Capital Circus of Budapest “Young Stars of the Ring”
1973 – Carl Althoff Zirkus (summer Season) - West Germany
1973 – Carl Althoff Zirkus (winter season) - Poland
1974 – Gebrüder Althoff Zirkus - West Germany
1974 – Dick Bennedaik theatre tour - Netherlands

1975 – Gebrüder Althoff Zirkus (summer season) - West Germany
1975 – Manchester International Circus (winter season) - England
1976 – Gebrüder Althoff Zirkus (summer season) - West Germany
1976 – Michael Edgley Circus tour - Australia
1977 – Michael Edgley Circus tour - Australia
1977 – Scott Circus (summer season) - Sweden
1977 – Monte Carlo International Circus Fesztivál - Monaco
1978 – Capital Circus of Budapest “Gála ’78” - Hungary
1978 – Krone Bau Circus, January winter show - West Germany
1978 – Benneweis Circus (summer season) - Denmark
1978 – Michael Edgley Circus tour - New Zealand
1979 – Michael Edgley Circus tour - Philippines
1979 – Elfi Althoff Jacobi “Hungarian National Circus”
 (artistical director) – Austria
1979 – Circo Embell Riva (summer season) - Italy
1980 – Circo Embell Riva (summer season) - Italy
1981 – Tivoli Park - Copenhagen, Denmark
1981 – Circo Embell Riva tour - Yugoslavia
1982 – Circo Embell Riva (summer season) - Italy
1983 – Circo Embell Riva (summer season) - Italy
1984 – Krone Bau Circus (March programme) - West Germany
1984 – Elfi Althoff Jacobi Circus (summer season) - Austria
1985 – Arlette Gruss Circus (summer season) - Ireland
1985 – Bobby Roberts winter “Super Circus” - Scotland
1986 – Hungarian National Circus tour
 (artistical director) - USSR
1987 – Martin Hanson “Hungarian National Circus” tour
 (as leader of the company) - Netherlands

PROFESSIONAL CAREER

- 1958 – 1987** - Internationally acclaimed acrobat employed by the Hungarian state circus company (MACIVA)
- 1985 – 1988** - President of the Union of Hungarian Circus Workers
- 1988 – 2012** - Director of the Capital Circus of Budapest
- 1992 – 2012** - Hungarian State Circus Training Institute (chairman of the examination board)
- 1996 – 2012** - Director and founder of the Budapest International Circus Festival

AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

- 1977** Mari Jászai Award
- 1977** Monte Carlo International Circus Festival, Silver Clown Award
- 1988** Hungarian Artist of Merit
- 1995** Gold Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary
- 1996** Franz Czeisler “Tihany Award”
- 1999** Award of the Hungarian National Association of Professional Associations
- 2001** Eternal member of the Russian Academy of Circus Artists
- 2004** Maxim Nikulin “Russian Clown Award”
- 2005** Pushkin Award received from Russian president Vladimir Putin
- 2005** Knight’s Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary
- 2012** Kobzov Lifetime Achievement Award
- 2012** Cirque du Soleil Lifetime Achievement Award
- 2012** Nikulin Lifetime Achievement Award
- 2012** MACIVA Lifetime Achievement Award



Receiving the Silver Clown Award in Monte Carlo (1977), with Cary Grant in the background

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