

8 'TODAY, YOU ARE MY MOTHER'

by Margaret Walker (February 2000)

One folk-song soloist from Hungary and one Lithuanian instrumentalist - could you possibly accommodate them both? It was Joan Jones of Hospitality on the phone, once more asking if we had spare beds at the Vicarage (at the time, Margaret's husband Michael was Vicar of Llangollen). So it was that on Eisteddfod Tuesday in 1991 we welcomed into our home Irén Lovász, a dark-haired 29-year-old newly-wed ethnologist from Budapest, and Aldreas, a fair-haired young man from Vilnius who played a variety of instruments which he had made himself. Neither had been to Britain before; both spoke excellent English.

The top button from Irén's blouse was lost; there were five minutes to go before she was due to sing in the folk-song preliminaries at the Town Hall. Aldreas, an archaeology graduate, and now an infants' teacher, was also an amateur silversmith. He produced a brooch to 'close the gap' and told Irén to wear it for luck.

Back from our duties at Floral and Awards, we were eating our dinner with usual Eisteddfod rapidity, half-an-hour before the evening concert was due to start; we were wondering where Irén was. The doorbell rang, and there she was, her eyes streaming with tears. 'Whatever is the matter?' I asked, fearing the worst. 'I am a winner,' came the reply; 'I am to sing on stage tomorrow!' Much relieved, I said, 'Oh, Irén, your mother would be so proud of you.' 'Today, you are my mother,' replied Irén, thereby reducing me to tears, as Michael joined in the communal hug.

Irén went on to win a prize, and from some of the money bought a sweatshirt with the Eisteddfod logo on from Publicity to give to Aldreas, whose brooch she had worn. Surely this was an encapsulation of the spirit of the Eisteddfod!

What a privilege to give hospitality to these two young people. Eight years on, and it has been our turn to be on the receiving end. Irén and her husband Peter, both university lecturers in Ethnology, now have a five-year-old son, Christoph,

and two-and-a-half-year-old twin daughters, Anna and Julia. Their Christmas 1998 letter invited us to their Buda home to celebrate Michael's 60th birthday.

Floods delayed our train to the airport on August 9th; this meant a missed flight, with the knock-on effect of a missed sleeper train from Zurich. So we arrived in Hungary 24 hours later than planned, and we missed the total eclipse spectacular which was to have been a holiday highlight.

But when we arrived at Irén's mother's home near Lake Balaton on the evening of the 11th, our disappointment was eclipsed by an even greater highlight. In the dusk in a warm garden, we ate Hungarian goulash and drank Tokai wine; then the children brought out a be-candled cake and sang 'Happy Birthday' to Michael. Once more it was time for a communal hug, as I retold the story of the previous one. Irén's mother thanked me, in Hungarian, for being 'mother' to Irén in Llangollen.

Irén is now a professional singer and has been made the Hungarian equivalent of a Bard for her services to folk culture. Her recent CD 'Rosebuds in a Stoneyard' won the German Record Critics Award. The last time we had heard her sing was in 1991, in the old marquee at Llangollen; this year, 1999, we sat in a park in Pest, with a large congregation including the local Mayor, as the Bishop consecrated a new sculpture; Irén was the guest soloist.

Once more, I felt a surge of 'surrogate maternal pride'. Thank you, Joan Jones, for sending Irén to us. And thank you, Llangollen Eisteddfod, for giving birth to such a wonderful friendship!



Irén and Aldreas in the
Vicarage garden, Llangollen, July 1991