

# The Strange Fate of Johann Bartok

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Johann Bartok, a plumber and contractor, had been married for five months when the war broke out. He was immediately drafted and sent to an Austrian garrison on the border. The day he left he was occupied with getting his affairs in order and transferring his small business to his wife and his associate. He even succeeded in obtaining two more contracts. The negotiations lasted until the afternoon, but at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that everything would be in order until Christmas. When evening came he put on his best suit and went with his wife to a photographer. So far they hadn't made an effort to be photographed—they had had to work hard in order to get by, so that must have seemed like a foolish expense to them. But now it was something different. The photographer brought the pictures to the train the next morning. Although they were printed larger than Bartok had expected, he tried to make a cutout with both faces that would fit into his watch cover, but he couldn't manage it; so he took his knife and cut his own picture out and only kept the one of his wife. Then it fit.

Bartok's regiment was quickly deployed to the front. It advanced in the winter of 1914 and was soon engaged in a violent night battle in which the enemy made a flanking maneuver and cut off three companies. They defended themselves for a whole day; when they ran out of ammunition they had to surrender. And Bartok was among them. The prisoners spent a few months in a collection camp. Bartok sat around the barracks the whole day and brooded. He would have liked to know how his wife was doing and if she could secure new contracts for the business, for it was now her means of support. But there wasn't a single letter for the whole camp and the only thing that Bartok could do was to try to send letters home with advice and addresses of people who might need, for example, a new iron fence or a toilet. Around the beginning of April a brigade of about 1800 men was assembled and sent to the coast. Bartok and his comrades were among them. They were taken aboard a steamer and the rumor went around that they were going to be shipped to a camp in East Asia.

For the first few days almost everyone was seasick. After that they sat around, crouched together in the stuffy atmosphere of the cargo hold and smoked for as long as they had cigarettes. They could only catch a fleeting glimpse of the sea through a few small portholes, so they took turns looking out. The water was blue and clear and sometimes they could see white wings or the shadow of a large fish.

The guards gradually became careless. The prisoners noticed this and forged a plan to surprise the crew and take control of the ship for themselves. A few of them spied on the rooms where the weapons were kept, and others armed themselves clandestinely with marlinspikes, cables, and knives.

Then they broke out on a stormy night. Three gigantic sergeants lead the group which Bartok was a part of. Seemingly harmless, they strolled to the cabin steps and then suddenly threw themselves like cats onto the shocked guards, who didn't put up any resistance. A few moments later they had broken the locks and were out on the deck.

Some of the crew were overpowered in their sleep, and the rest had to surrender. Only the captain and two officers barricaded themselves and opened fire. Three prisoners were killed by revolver fire. But when they brought a machine gun into position, the severely wounded captain surrendered.

The prisoners intended to break through to a neutral port, for they were well-supplied with weapons and food and a few of them had previously been sailors. A former naval officer took command. They exercised every day and Bartok was trained on the machine gun. The commanding officer estimated that it would be a full week until they reached the nearest port. But it turned out differently. On the fourth day, the low gray hull of a warship came over the horizon. With smoking chimneys it headed right for the steamship with the prisoners.

They tried to break away but were not fast enough. Then they got everything ready to defend themselves in the hope that they could hold out until the coming of night and then escape under the cover of fog and darkness.

But they were not successful. They had guns, to be sure, but they were unable to reach the cruiser. After an hour many were dead and they were compelled to hoist the white flag. The naval officer shot himself when the first boat of the warship pulled up alongside. The captain of the cruiser didn't treat the prisoners as soldiers, but rather as mutineers and they were brought to a prison colony on an island. A few of the ringleaders were shot, and one of them was Michael Horvath, Bartok's friend. He gave Bartok his watch and his wallet. "Good luck, Johann", he said and shook his hand, saying, "it doesn't matter if I die in this way or another—the end result is the same—Let's hope that you make it through! If my mother is still alive by then, give her these things, ok?"

The remaining prisoners were found guilty of mutiny. Every fifth man was sentenced to life imprisonment and the rest to fifteen years of forced labor. As they counted off, Bartok was lucky—he only got fifteen years.

"Fifteen years", he thought on the evening of the first day as he lay down with aching limbs in the corner of an intolerably hot tin hut, "fifteen years. Today I am thirty-two. Then I will be forty-seven." He took the picture of his wife out of the watch cover and looked at it for a long time. Then he shook his head and tried to fall asleep.

The work was hard and the climate murderous. One hundred and eighty men died in the first year. In the second one hundred and ten. In the fourth year Bartok became friends with Wilczek, a farmer from the Banat. In the sixth he buried him. In the seventh he lost his front teeth. In the eighth he found out that the war was long over. In the ninth year he became gray. In the tenth year sixteen men ran away, but

they were caught again. In the twelfth year no-one spoke of home anymore. The world had shrunk to an island, living was slavery and deep sleep, longing was expunged, pain had been deadened, memory destroyed—over the senseless remains of human beings, which lay down quietly to die every night and yet got up every morning, stood only guards, large and lordly, fever, and despair.

When the overseer told them that they were free they didn't believe it at first. Until the very last day they had thought that he would come and inform them that they had to stay for five more years—so little could they imagine what it meant to be free. They packed up their meager belongings and marched down to the harbor. Bartok looked around one more time. There, in front of the huts, he saw the survivors of those comrades who had gotten life imprisonment and now had to stay behind. They looked at them in silence. Before the decampment he had asked two of them if he could send them anything from home. "Shut your mouth!" one of them had answered and then left. The other didn't understand anything anymore. But the first came running a few steps behind them—"We're coming too!" he screamed. The others didn't stir. They only stood there and stared.

On the way to the ship Bartok took his watch out. The picture of his wife was still there—it was all faded and nothing recognizable remained. But he took it out and tried to remember. He hadn't done that for a very long time, and it was so uncomfortable for him that his head soon spun.

Back on land, he traveled on with a few comrades from the same area. They discovered that their home now belonged to a country they had fought against. The area was ceded as a result of the peace treaty. They didn't understand it, but they accepted it for the time being. For them the whole world had changed in fifteen years. They saw houses, streets, cars, people—they heard familiar names and still everything was foreign. The cities had gotten bigger, the traffic frightened them, and they found it difficult to understand what was going on around them. Everything moved too quickly. They were only used to thinking slowly.

At last Bartok reached his hometown. His knees trembled with such excitement that he had to move around slowly and support himself with a cane. He found the house in which he had lived. The business was still there, but no one knew anything about his wife. The tenancy had changed many times over the last ten years. His wife must have gone away a long time ago. Bartok searched everywhere. Finally he found out that she was probably living in a larger city to the west.

He went to the city whose name someone had given him. There he stood before many a door and many a hall and asked about her. When no one could give him any information and he was so hopeless and exhausted that he was about to leave again, he suddenly had an idea. He turned around and told the official the name of his former associate. The official looked into his book a second time and found him. His wife had married him seven years ago. Bartok nodded. Now it was clear to him why he hadn't gotten any letters, why he hadn't heard anything from home. They had assumed that he was dead.

Slowly he climbed up the stairs and rang the bell. A five-year old child opened the door. Then his wife came. He looked at her, and unsure if it were her, didn't trust

himself to speak.

“I am Johann”, he finally said.

“Johann!” She took a step back and let herself fall heavily into a chair. “Holy mother of God!” She began to cry. “But we got a notification—a certificate—that you were dead!”

She pulled out a drawer and began to rummage around with quivering hands, as if her life depended upon finding this certificate again.

“Ok, ok, leave it alone.” - Bartok went absent-mindedly through the kitchen. “Is that your child?” he asked. His wife nodded. “Do you have more?”

“Two”

“So, two—” he repeated mechanically. Then he sat down on the sofa and stared into space.

“What will happen now, Johann?” his wife asked through tears. Bartok looked up.

In front of him, on a low bureau, stood a small photograph in a golden frame. It was the photograph they had made before he became a soldier. He took it down and examined it for a long time. Then he looked at his wife again. He ran his hand through his hair.

“Five months, right?”

“Yes, Johann—”

“And now?”

“Seven years”, she answered softly. He nodded and stood up. His wife hugged him. “You’re not leaving again.”

“I am—”, he said and took his cap.

“At least stay until supper”, she begged. “Until Alfred comes—”

He shook his head. “No, no—it’s better this way. Then you would have to explain everything. It’s all right as it is.”

Outside in front of the house he stopped for a while. Then he went back to the train station and returned to his hometown. He wanted to look for work there and start again from the beginning.