



Hi, Marika,” Julia greeted.

“Since the teacher isn’t here yet, we want to ask you something that’s been bothering us.”

It was early. The school bell hadn’t rung yet. Thirteen-year-old Marika faced her two classmates, Ágnes and Julia, who had come strutting across the room. Both girls’ faces

showed that they were up to no good.

Marika’s tummy tensed at Julia’s words. Ever since an illness had held her back a grade, she’d felt uncomfortable around classmates. Whenever they whispered or pointed in her direction, she felt sure they were making fun of her for being in seventh grade with her sister, Ilona, who was a year younger.

“What is it?” she asked. “Did I do something?”

Julia elbowed the other girl to speak up too.

Ágnes moved forward, closing the gap between herself and Marika.

“We’re just wondering why we never see you or your sisters in church on Sundays,” Ágnes asked. “Doesn’t your family go to Mass?”

Marika stood silent for a moment, wondering what to say. She knew they wanted to embarrass her, to force her to confess that her family, unlike most Hungarians, was not Catholic. She wasn’t ashamed of their religion, but she didn’t want to argue about it either. Stalling, Marika fingered one pigtail and looked out the window, pretending to think of an answer while silently asking God to give her the words.

Seconds later she felt a rush of courage. She turned and looked directly into Ágnes’ steel-gray eyes. “We never go to Mass because we aren’t Catholic. But we do go to church every week on the Sabbath. That’s Saturday.”

“Saturday?” the girls said in unison. They gave each other puzzled looks, shaking their heads in disbelief.

Ágnes leaned closer, backing Marika against the chalkboard.

“Why would you do that?” she demanded. “It’s stupid to go to church on Saturday! That’s when everyone works! My papa works every Saturday in his grocery store, all day long. Don’t you know you’re supposed to go to church on Sunday? The priest says so!”

Marika felt her courage fading. She glanced at the classroom door, hoping to see the teacher entering. But the door remained closed while the other students busily talked in small groups. Even Ilona was busy and hadn’t seen what was happening. Only God could help her.

Finally she decided to ignore Ágnes and focus on Julia, who wasn’t acting as mean.

“My family is Seventh-day Advent-ist. We honor the Sabbath because that’s what God’s Word says to do. You can read it for yourself.”

Julia looked doubtful, but she pulled on her friend’s sleeve to make her step back. “Come on, Ágnes, let’s go. The teacher will be here any minute.”

As they turned to leave, Ágnes gave Marika one last defiant stare.

“I’m going to look that up,” she challenged, “even though I know you’re wrong.”

Relieved that the incident was over, Marika nodded and found her seat. Besides worshipping on Saturday, she wondered how she could explain that her family’s faith was different from other religions in many ways. For Marika and her family, religion was a lifestyle, not something done only at church once each week.

That was sometimes a problem in a Communist country. The year was 1963, and the Russians still governed Hungary.

This meant people didn’t have much freedom to go to church as they pleased or choose the job they wanted. Communists encouraged disloyalty among family members, coworkers, and friends through bribes and other incentives. This made everyone distrustful of each other.

Marika remembered how Mama had told her about losing their house in the small town of Gödöllő, where Marika was born. When Marika was 4, the government had taken the house from her family to give to a Communist official, just because he’d admired its neat, clean appearance. After that, the family had moved to the nearby city of Budapest.

Two years later Marika had watched the Hungarian people try to fight for more freedom and food in something called an uprising. But Russian tanks had entered the city to stop it, killing thousands of protestors. The loud noise had woken Mama up and made her cry. Budapest had been bombed for days, and everyone had been afraid.

Because of that fear, Marika was never sure if a question about her religion was just someone being curious, or teasing to be mean, or something much worse, something that could get her parents into big trouble with the government. Papa had warned his girls to be careful, to watch what they said about God and freedom, even to their friends. As the oldest, Marika understood that if something bad did happen, there would be no way to fight back or force the government to treat them fairly.

When school was finished for that day, she and Ilona walked home with their youngest sister, 8-year-old Erzsébet. The winter air felt chilly as they wound through their neighborhood to the big house they shared with two other families. It was really an old mansion confiscated by the government after a wealthy Jewish family had abandoned it to escape harsh Russian control. With so many people living there, it didn't seem very fancy. But Mama and Papa did what they could to make their part of the house feel more private.

Coming around the path, they entered the house through their own private doorway. They passed through the front room, where Mama and Papa slept, and went to the larger back room that doubled as a living and dining room during the day and a bedroom for the three sisters at night. Beyond that room was the kitchen, where Mama was humming and making an afternoon snack.

"Hi, Mama." Marika gave her mother a big hug. "Is that lemonade? Can you put in extra honey with the club soda? I'm really thirsty!"

"Sure," her mother responded with a loving nod. "You go back to the living room and sit in front of the oven. I'll bring it when it's ready."

"Beigli too?" Erzsébet begged.

"Yes, beigli too."

The tired trio settled down as one on the rug in front of the huge green-tiled ceramic oven in the corner of the room. Its black iron door was open, and the burning logs glowed orange with wonderful warmth. They could have sat on the sofa bed where they slept at night, but they liked being on the rug. In the other corner were two tall wardrobes for their clothes, with a dining table, a radio, and a record player nearby.

"Would you like some help with your math homework later?" Ilona asked Marika.

Marika nodded, but didn't think it would do much good. She just wasn't good at math, as Ilona was. She liked creative things, such as cooking and sewing. Ilona, on the other hand, preferred science and electronics, especially when she could get her hands on a small

appliance that could be taken apart and put back together. She even took apart their electric iron, forcing Mama to use the heavy iron that had to be heated on the stove.

“You’ve got to try,” Ilona encouraged her. “We’ll do every problem together.”

Mama came in with their snack. “Come sit at the table, girls,” she urged.

They grumbled but obeyed. To disobey Mama or Papa was unthinkable!

Munching the homemade beigli, a pastry with sweet poppy seed filling, Marika thought ahead to the rest of seventh grade. School already felt like the kind of heavy burden Papa’s donkey, Violet, carried. Would it always be like that? Or would eighth grade open up a whole new world?