

Charley Faludi's Victory

Charlie's wife, Rose called me yesterday to tell me that Charlie had died. It wasn't exactly a shock - he had been seriously ill for several months and she had talked in guarded language the last time I had called to find out how he was doing. But it still saddens me to think of him.

Maybe I had brought Charlie bad luck. We had both planned to go to Budapest in the summer of 1992 to attend an international meeting of pilots of all nations who flew in combat over Hungary during World War. He was a member of the Hungarian Veteran Pilots Association and so he arranged with the headquarters in Budapest for me to be invited to attend. Neither one of us made it. I had open-heart surgery and he came down with a serious illness that I never quite understood. Up until then, he had not been sick a day in his life. How do you explain it?

His name was really Karolyi Faludi but everyone called him Charlie. Although he had lived in this country for 40 years, he still had the trace of a Hungarian accent. I had heard about him from one of my acquaintances; how he had flown the Me-109 during WWII with the Puma Group, a crack Hungarian fighter outfit, in defense of Budapest and its environs. I was in the midst of preparing a book for publication at that time and needed a picture of a Me-109, so naturally I thought of Charley. He happily furnished me with several, showing himself in the cockpit of the 109. The resulting contact turned into a long-lasting friendship which both of us cherished.

In the course of our acquaintance, I learned something of his early personal life. In 1941 as a college student he realized that war in Europe was imminent. In order to beat the draft he enrolled in a civilian pilot training program that enabled him to enter the Hungarian Air Force. He was called up to active duty on November 4, 1941 at age 18. The initial flying training was at Szombathely/Vat flying an Arado, AR-96. Thereafter he was chosen to be a fighter pilot and went to Szolnok/Tapolca where he flew the Ro-41 and Fiats 30,32, and CR-42. On completion of the training in November 1942 he was awarded the coveted Golden Eagle, the dream of every Hungarian young man.

His first assignment was to a fighter squadron at Matyasfold airdrome near Budapest flying the Italian Falcon, the Re-2000. He was transferred to another squadron that was at Ferihegy, the Budapest International Airport of today. Shortly thereafter, in January 1944, the unit was equipped with the first line German fighter, the Me-109G (Gustav). The air war was coming to Hungary.

Beginning in April 1944, the U.S. 15th Air Force based in Italy began bombing Hungarian targets in earnest. On April 13th, 1944 he was part of a formation that was given the alarm to intercept the incoming American "four-motors". Due to a bungled intercept by the ground controllers, the fighters failed to make contact and were recalled. Charlie remembers:

"As we prepared to land, bombs began exploding all around us. Our first flight was already on the ground. Like disturbed pigeons, the rest of us pulled up in all directions. I soon found myself among 8 or 10 P-38's. I circled up for altitude, twisting left and right in an effort to throw off the enemy fighters. At 20,000 ft. and with my red fuel light blinking its warning, I got a shot at a P-38 trying to escape

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downward. Suddenly I took a full blast from an unseen plane and at the same time was hit by our own flak. In seconds my plane was in flames and I bailed out with bullets whizzing past me. By the time my parachute opened, I'd drifted from a wild, deafening inferno into a churchlike silence. For a moment there was no battle - only total peace. Recovering from the leg wound took two months and I had time to reflect a lot on the action I had seen. My ego was badly shaken and I vowed never again to allow someone to shoot me down. When I rejoined my "wiped out" squadron, part of the famous 101 Fighter Group (Puma's), I was feeling better and more secure."

Charlie had been shot down by Lt. Orson Osborne, a P-38 pilot of the 82nd Fighter Group, then located at Vincenzo, just north of Bari, Italy. He went back on operations with considerably more determination and finally, success.

On the 26th of June he shot down a B-24 Liberator; on July 2nd he managed to duplicate this feat. A week later he tangled with escorting fighters and shot down two P-38's, the second one from the same group and squadron of the pilot who had shot him down earlier. He had a great sense of humor and on one occasion when we were swapping flying stories, he told me something of this last P-38 victory which had occurred near Papa, northwest of Lake Balaton. He had just been in a fight and was looking around to get his bearings when he spotted a lone P-38 below him. The Lightning pilot seemed to be having trouble with one engine so Charley had no difficulty in slipping up behind him and finishing him off with a long burst. Fortunately, the American pilot was able to bail out and was captured almost immediately by Hungarian soldiers.

Of course they wasted no time in stripping him of his watch and anything else of value - and perhaps a few things of little or no value for good measure. It turned out that the Officer in charge of the prisoner detail was a friend of Charlie's. Some how he had found out that Charlie was the American pilot's "Daddy", the Hungarian term for the victor in an aerial encounter. He came out to the airbase at Veszprem to visit Charlie and presented him with the P-38 pilot's flying helmet. Charlie was delighted. He explained to me years later, in his rich Hungarian accent:

"You shoot down Roshian, dot's notink. You notink til you shoot down American pilot. So I poot the helmet in my belt, like Indian scalp, and go round the base for two weeks like so. It says, "Look at Charlie. He shoot down American pilot"

As a sequel to the story, he did a considerable amount of research in later years and finally discovered the name and address of his victim that day. He called him on the phone, intending to rehash the old air battle over Hungary. When his erstwhile opponent understood who was calling, he abruptly put an end to the conversation in short order:

"I don't want to talk to you and I don't want you to ever call me again."

Charlie's comment was:

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"That was one peesed-off man."

Apparently the "vanquished" had other than fond memories of the encounter and his days in the prisoner-of-war camp. But Charlie was unruffled and took it all in stride. I believe he looked back on the war with the same feelings as most of us, on both sides of the conflict. It was just something that happened to us, but something of such profound consequences that our lives from that time on would be almost anti-climactic.

"Viszontlátásra", Charlie Faludi.



Senior Corporal Karoly Faludi of the Royal Hungarian Air Force's 2/1 Fighter Squadron. This photo was taken at Ferihegy Airfield near Budapest in March, 1944.

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Footnote:

The picture and caption are from a story on the internet “Ambush over Hungary, A Puma Pilot's Revenge” by Steve Blake. This story has additional information about the exploits of Mr. Karoly Faludi if you are interested in reading more:

<http://www.internetmodeler.com/awn/98-march/ambush.htm>