

## 10. ICELAND, 1946-47

I thought that in going to a place that had been neutral during the war, I would get rid of all this atmosphere. It was an atmosphere of suspicion. It was an atmosphere of hatred for anything that was National Socialism. I thought to myself, "I'll go to Iceland. Iceland is a far away place. I won't hear anything of Nazis there." And on the 8th of November '46, I sailed to Iceland from Hull. I had no money except twenty-five pounds. The boat cost twenty pounds. I landed in Reykjavik with five pounds after a very, very stormy journey.<sup>76</sup> The room at the hotel cost five pounds. I could stay one night even without the breakfast.

So I went to the Salvation Army. Where should I go? And I told the Salvation Army that I came to learn Icelandic. "I'm interested in the language, and I'd like to get a job." And they said, "We have no job, unfortunately for you, not with your doctorate and your L.Sc. and M.A. degrees. The only job we have is the job of a maidservant in a farm some miles from Reykjavik, to wash the plates." I said, "Give me that job." They said, "You'll have your afternoons free. You can learn Icelandic in the afternoons." So I worked. So I washed plates for a month on an Icelandic farm. I picked up a little Icelandic, not much of course, and I continued picking it up. I continued learning the grammar and improving it as much as I could. I admired the Nordic type of Iceland. Beautiful people. Beautiful people. And to think that so many of them were on the other side. Against all I stand for. That put me out. But they were beautiful.

And one day I had a call. The Icelandic farmer had a telephone. Iceland is an extremely modern land—very modern. And the phone call came from an Icelander of Reykjavik telling me he had an Austrian wife. He would like me to live in a room he would give me for nothing. The only condition was that I would speak French with his Austrian wife. I said, "All right." I came to his home. The dog of the farm followed me for ten miles all through the snow. I caressed the dog, and he even came to the home of this Icelander. And he had something to eat and went back. I stayed there. I stayed there nearly a year.

I saw the eruption of Mt. Hekla. On the 29th of March '47 it started, and it lasted practically the whole year. I went to see it on the 4th of April, and I spent the night of the 5th of April on the slopes of the

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<sup>76</sup> In *Gold in the Furnace* (Calcutta: A.K. Mukherji, 1952), Savitri describes being on a ship in a storm on the North Sea and makes it clear that she found the experience thrillingly sublime (*Gold in the Furnace*, 258).

erupting volcano. I wanted to spend the first night there, but the people who were with me took my cloak, and I had to go down again too. I couldn't stay the whole night—snowy night too—with no cloak, no overcoat.

The second night I went up by myself, 11:00 at night, after work. I went up to one kilometer from the big crater. There were five small craters and two big ones. And I admired it. Imagine a snowy landscape, a landscape of silver. The full moon over that in a violet sky, and in front of the full moon a pennant of volcanic ash, volcanic smoke, black, as black as can be. And hanging in the sky, beautiful Northern Lights—green and purple, greenish-yellow, moving like that, and purple fringe. It was beautiful.

I was in front of the lava stream. The lava of Mt. Hekla is an acid lava. It contains 60-65% silica. It is thick. It doesn't run like water, like the Vesuvius lava or like the Stromboli lava. It takes time to walk, walks a few meters per day. And the top of it is with a crust as thick as five centimeters, or perhaps more. And when that breaks under the pressure of boulders from inside it makes a queer noise like broken crockery. I was there going up and down, up and down along the stream for the whole night.

And I wanted to go around the stream and go nearer to the crater. But some scientists who were there told me, "Don't do that, because the two lava streams might merge into one and you'll be in an island surrounded with lava, and you won't be able to come out." So I couldn't do that.

Suddenly flames came out—two, three places, new tiny little craters. I fled, of course. But all the time what impressed me was the roaring of the volcano, like the original sound in the Hindu tradition. The original sound of creation is "Aum."<sup>77</sup> The volcano says every two or three seconds, "AUM! AUM! AUM!" And the earth is trembling under your feet all the time.

Anyhow, I waited. I saw the sunrise over that. It was a beautiful landscape. And I tried to come down. Instead of coming down I got myself lost. And I had in my hand a big slice of lava. I had some small ones too, but I had a big one as well, ten or fifteen kilos. There was a boulder there, that flung itself out of the lava stream in front of me, and it came rushing in front of my face. It was fifteen or ten centimeters in front of my face. If that had hit me I wouldn't be here to speak. And then it went cold, and when it became cold I took a slice. I took a big

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<sup>77</sup> On "Aum," see the 12 verses of the Mandukya Upanishad.

piece and carried it about. I thought I would give that to some friends when I got back. But it was heavy, and I was getting exhausted, and at one time I couldn't find my way back. I absolutely couldn't find my way back. I started weeping out of desperation. I said, "I crossed the river to come here. Where's the river?"

Then I found the river. I went down, and I left the big boulder alone. I couldn't carry it any longer, and then I saw somebody on the bank of the river. I saw two children. I called them. They ran away at my sight. And I saw a man, and I asked him. I said, "The so-and-so farm, the farm from which I had started, where is it?" "It is right here. It's around the corner. You go down. You turn left. It's around the corner."

I got back to the farm, and I looked at myself in the looking glass. When I saw myself in the looking glass, I understood why the children fled. My face was black with volcanic ash and smoke, absolutely black, and my eyes were red with volcanic ash in them, and they were aching, and there were white tears in the black. I looked awful. I quite understood. Anyhow I washed my face, and I sat down and had a nice cup of coffee and had a piece of bread and butter, and the day passed on, and I went back to the place where I was staying a few miles away from the volcano. But that was a unique experience.<sup>78</sup>

I love volcanoes. I would like, if I had money and opportunity, to see all the volcanoes of the earth. I'd like to hear Chimborazo and Cotopaxi on the equator.<sup>79</sup> I'd like to hear their roaring, see their lava streams. I love them. I remember an expression that was familiar to us in school about the Pacific Ocean, "*la ceinture de fleur de Pacific*"—"the flower belt of the Pacific"—Japan, Alaska, South America, all around, all around. I'd love to see them. But I only saw three in my life.<sup>80</sup> I don't know if I will live long enough to see another one.

Anyhow, in the summer of that year, I had a few pupils. I lived in Iceland. I got to learn Icelandic. I used to speak fluently. It's a language very akin to German, and when I knew Icelandic and could hear the

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. *Defiance*, 72-73, 203, and 456-57; cf. *Gold in the Furnace*, 258.

<sup>79</sup> Chimborazo and Cotopaxi are located in Ecuador. At 20,700 feet (6,310 meters), Chimborazo is the tallest mountain in Ecuador. The peak has the distinction of being the point on the Earth's surface furthest from its center. Chimborazo has not erupted during human history. At 19,374 feet (5,897 meters) Cotopaxi is the second tallest mountain in Ecuador and the tallest active volcano in the world.

<sup>80</sup> Presumably the aforementioned Vesuvius and Stromboli, which implies that Savitri's travels also included the Bay of Naples and Sicily. Savitri visited Italy at least four times, in 1923, 1926, 1950, and 1953. Although she did not consider herself fluent in Italian, she knew the language well enough to read it and give lectures in it.

radio and could hear people speak, I thought it was no better than England. Only the landscape was different. But the mentality of the people was just the same. The same stupid anti-Nazi mentality. Fed on propaganda and fed on reaction to anything that hurts human beings.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Savitri finished her *Akhmaton: A Play* (London: The Philosophical Publishing House, 1948) in Reykjavik on 16 April 1947. For accounts of her worship of the Midnight Sun and her visit to the Godafoss (Waterfall of the Gods) during her journey to Iceland, see *Defiance*, 186 and 495-97.