The Long Road to the Ballot Box (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

My grandmother kept an old photograph above the kitchen door. It showed a crowd of people in the town square, holding banners on a rainy morning in 1948. She was seventeen then, and she had walked eight kilometres to be there. The picture, she told me, was taken on the day the island celebrated its independence from foreign rule.

The years that followed were not easy. The new government promised a modern democracy in which every adult could help choose the leaders. In practice, the process was slow and confusing. Many people had never taken part in voting before, and the first ballot papers were printed in a language half the population could not read. My grandmother joined a small committee of teachers who travelled from village to village explaining how the system worked. They were not paid, and they were often laughed at.

Not everyone welcomed them. A powerful landowner in the north organised fierce opposition to their work, claiming that ordinary farmers were too ignorant to be trusted. He had friends in the regional council, and for two years they blocked every plan the teachers proposed. My grandmother told me that she never hated him. She simply kept going, because she believed that a right which belongs to some people but not to others is worth very little. She wanted the vote to be universal, without exceptions.

The turning point came in 1953. A young representative of the fishing villages stood up at a public meeting and described how his community had been ignored for a decade. His speech was reported everywhere. Within months, a new law extended full civil rights to every adult on the island, and the government declared that each citizen over the age of twenty-one could take part. There was no violence, no revolution, and no army in the streets. My grandmother always said that this was the achievement she was proudest of, precisely because nothing dramatic had happened.

She voted in every presidential election for the next fifty years, and she never missed a local one either. When she grew too weak to walk, my father carried her to the school hall. She used to say that democratic is not something a country wins once and then keeps forever, like a trophy on a shelf. It has to be practised, argued about and repaired, generation after generation. On the wall beside her photograph she hung a piece of paper with a single word written on it in her careful handwriting: unity. When people asked her what it meant, she said it meant that we were all standing in the same queue, waiting for the same thing. That, she believed, was the beginning of any decent civilization.

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