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Liberation



A few hours later we heard trucks pulling up outside. Then the barn door opened and Russian soldiers stood in the blinding light, looking in. One of them spat and said, “God, what a filthy, stinking bunch! If you expect us to help you, you’ll have to get out of that barn on your own. We’re not dirtying our boots setting foot in there.”

We lay where we were, most of us unable to move. When we finally realized that they truly were not going to help us, we began dragging ourselves out. Gitu and I could still crawl, but Relly’s leg had gangrened and she was too sick to move. The two of us hauled her out between us like a sack.

There were scarcely 80 survivors in all; five of us from Uzhorod. One abandoned her mother, still alive but unable to move. We were loaded in a truck and driven off.

It was March 11, 1945 and we were in Lithuania. We had cherished such high hopes of our liberation. Now that it had come, we were still as weak, starved, sick and scared as ever.

We were taken to a house belonging to some well-to-do Germans who had fled the Russians. Relly was incoherent with fever. A Russian officer ordered an ambulance to take her to a nearby medical facility. We went along and waited while the doctors amputated her leg. All sorts of thoughts crowded through my head—how close we had been, how often we had helped and even saved each other. Relly loved dancing and was so proud of her shapely legs and small feet. Who would marry her with only one leg? But that was a small worry after all we’d been through. Besides,

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there would be plenty of men back from the war with only one leg or one arm or one eye, and any of them would be lucky to get a hard-working, laughing girl like Relly.

We waited for what seemed like a long time. Then a man came out and told us that Relly had died during the surgery. The irony of it struck me harder than the sadness. To have lived through the war, only to die after liberation!

We spent the first few days of freedom scrubbing and scrubbing ourselves, assaulting the layers of filth, the colonies of lice. There was food and the soldiers saw we got plenty. They gave us clean clothes too, mostly military wear.

But their generosity had a price. During the month it took for us to regain a modicum of strength, the soldiers approached us day and night for sex. Even on the very first evening, women were raped, some of them 10 or 20 times. Many died from the brutality of their Russian liberators.

On that first night, a gang of them woke me from sleep. I still remember how huge and menacing they looked in the shifting shadows of the flashlights, demanding we show them our gratitude. Fortunately, I spoke Russian. On the spot, I improvised a little routine. I addressed everybody as "captain." Then I went on, "It would be an honor—I would be delighted—to make love with such handsome liberators, but I really must warn you that I have syphilis, tuberculosis, and leprosy." I hoped that at least one of these impressive diseases would register. "With God's help, I'll be cured soon, so please come back then and we'll have a good time." Meanwhile, by way of proof, I was undoing my dress and treating them to the sight of my fearful collection of boils.

It worked. Over the next month or two, I went through this routine not once but a hundred times, and I was never molested.

It may seem hard to believe that any men, however brutal, could desire such wretched, emaciated and hideous creatures. But many had been at the front for years, with little or no access to

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women. Besides, war dehumanizes. It atrophies all tender feelings, including both sympathy and the aesthetic sense.

Even so, some of the Russians were kind. I remember one who urged me in the strongest terms not to eat too much because it could be fatal. The intestines, he said, could not stand the sudden burden. Another asked me what I needed, and I said, "Something to cover my head." He brought me a towel and it was as if he had given me the moon. I wound it around the rough stubble on my head. What a change in my reflection in the mirror!

Making that turban was my first symbolic step back toward a normal life. I have kept that towel to this day. For nearly a month, we did little but rest and eat. As my strength came back, I persuaded the three other girls from Uzhorod—Gitu, Edith and Rose—that we should try to get home. The war was still on, and there was no civilian transportation. Our only chance was to travel by military train.

Thanks to my Russian, I was the leader. Luck, persistence, and a refusal to take no for an answer got us aboard a troop transport headed south. The soldiers let us crouch in a corner as if we were dogs. To ward off sexual interest, we rehearsed a group act. I had always been a clown, and I used my talent now to distort my face into a hideous grimace. One of the other girls coughed incessantly, while another twitched and shook, and the third made constant crying noises. We were a thoroughly grotesque quartet, and we were spat on from time to time but never came to any further harm.

It took us three weeks to get to Uzhorod, shifting from train to train and spending long days and nights in stations. If the Red Cross were at a station, they would feed us. Sometimes a soldier tossed us some of his rations. Thanks to the camps, we had no trouble sleeping on benches or floors.

Only military trains and personnel were moving. Throughout the journey, we saw no civilians. It was an eerie, hallucinatory experience. Even so, as we drew nearer home, hope came alive. Surely someone we knew, some loved ones, would still be alive.