

The Homecoming



In appearance, Uzhorod had been left untouched by the war. It had gone from Hungarian occupation to German to Russian without a shot being fired or a harvest being missed. As we got off the train in the familiar station, then stepped outside to see well-fed people going about their business, it all seemed like a mirage. The streets and the trees and the buildings were just as we had left them.

Only the uniform of the army of occupation was different. But that was an old story in Uzhorod. People were staring. Did they recognize us, or were they merely astonished at the sight of these starved and ragged specters suddenly standing in their midst? Mothers drew their children close. Mothers with children! In a whole year, we had not seen mothers with children. Mothers and children were sent to the gas, then fed to the flames. What were these mothers and children doing alive?

I was stabbed with agony. My own mother! And my sister-in-law, Ibi, and her six-month-old baby! I didn't dare think of them. I would go mad if I thought of them. But for just a moment, the sight of a young mother with a toddler and a baby brought everything back.

We were home, but what did that mean? Conflicting emotions assailed me. One instant, I was glad to be alive. The next, I was enraged at what had been done to me, at what had been done to all of us, while Uzhorod went about its business as if we had never existed.

I controlled myself. I must stop feeling and think, I decided.

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Where was I to go? The dear friends and relatives who had made Uzhorod the center of my existence—they were gone, all gone. My home, I was sure, had gone too. It must now belong to someone else.

Why had I come? What should I do? What door would open to me? Whose smiles and kisses would welcome me back? I decided to look for Ami, Nick's nurse. She was the most likely person to be alive, and also to have news of Nick.

My friends went off in search of their own connections and I found my way to Ami's. To my delight, she opened the door when I knocked, gasped in astonishment, then cried out and pulled me into her arms. Her small apartment was unchanged and she was unchanged. The same round face, dark hair and warm smile. The same Ami.

She had heard nothing from Nick, but was full of other news, almost all of it agonizing. Virtually everyone I asked after was dead, and our home now belonged to the Russian Minister of Agriculture. But there was one bright spot: Mariska, our maid, was still working there, and she had saved what she could, including some family photographs. And Eugen, a close friend of Nick's and mine, had escaped into the forests and become a partisan. Now he was back in town.

As soon as they heard I was back, Mariska and Eugen came to see me. None of them could do enough. Mariska made me three meals a day, and so did Ami, while Eugen brought me pastries. I had a bed to sleep in and clean, feminine clothes from the Red Cross. I could not believe there was so much goodness, comfort and kindness in the world, after all that deprivation and cruelty.

I went to what had been my home. Mariska let me in at the kitchen door and took me to her room. Her walls were covered with pictures of my family. Leaving her a few to keep, I took down the rest with my own hands. Father! Mother! I could not bear to look at them too long. I was moved beyond words at Mariska's caring and thoughtfulness. If I had let my deepest feelings through I would have perished on the spot.

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I wanted to do something to thank and repay her, and also Ami and Eugen. But I was destitute. If I could get to the infirmary in the mountains, I thought, I could look for the valuables Nick and I had buried and stop having to depend on their charity. But the war was still on and there was no transportation.

In the meantime, I went to my Grandfather Kaufman's apartment building. At the sight of it, overpowering memories broke through. We had always gone there for the major Jewish holidays when I was a child. We had tethered Rose, our cow, in the shed and she had bellowed all night. When my grandmother died, I had stayed with Grandfather to keep him company. I had argued with him in favor of Communism, and he had slapped me. All of that seemed unbearably precious now.

I stepped into the courtyard and saw the janitor, working in a corner. I rushed over to him, glad to see another familiar face. His shocked look, followed by a forced smile, told me that the joy was one-sided. I asked after his wife, who had once worked for my parents. He muttered something about her being fine. His eyes evaded mine and kept darting around.

I wondered if he were afraid of me. Expecting we would never come back, perhaps he had stolen some of our things. I tried to reassure him. "I just came to look around," I told him. "I don't want anything for myself. I just want a few tokens for thank-you gifts."

He grunted, nodded, and led me upstairs. For some reason, the apartment was standing vacant and things were much as I remembered them. Ten or 15 minutes were about as much as I could stand. There was a toiletry set Mariska had always admired, so I took that for her. Then, on the way out, in the front room, my gaze fixed on a lovely antique clock, trimmed with gold leaf and colored enamel.

I had always loved that clock. As a child, I would look up to where it hung on the wall, marveling at the colors and the craftsmanship. My mother had taught me how to detach from material

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things and I had learned the lesson well. But I could not bear to part with that clock.

I asked the janitor to take it down for me. He did, and we left the apartment together. The door opened onto a kind of balcony that led to the staircase and overlooked the inner courtyard. Quite suddenly, the janitor crossed to the railing, gave me a look of utter malice, then hurled the clock to the courtyard below. It shattered into a hundred fragments, and it felt to me as if my whole insides had been shattered too.

For a minute or two I just stood there staring. Then I came to life, ran down the stairs, and kept running until I got to Ami's place. I was unable to speak for the rest of the day.

The next morning, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and found myself arrested by two military policemen. I was marched through the main street of Uzhorod, flanked by these men with rifles on their shoulders. When I found my voice, I begged to know why I had been arrested. "For making anti-Russian statements," I was told.

I was terrified. I already knew that, under the Russians, the burden of proof was on the accused. They did not need proof that I was guilty. I needed proof that I was innocent. And how on earth was I to prove I had not said something?

I asked where they were taking me. "To a military tribunal for civilians," they said. My heart sank. The military could do anything. They could torture me to death or shoot me at dawn or send me off to prison or exile me to Siberia, and no one would ever know what had become of me. I was the daughter of a bourgeois family, a Jewish family. To someone like me, they would show no mercy.

I would never see Nick again. If by chance he were alive, and heard of this, it would kill him, too.

Life had just become worth living again, and now it was to be taken away. The irony! To survive my persecutors and then be destroyed by my liberators.

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We arrived at a large public building. I was taken through a side door into a crowded waiting room. In a far corner, I noticed, were the janitor and his wife. It was no surprise. I had surmised by now that they were behind this.

There was nothing to do but wait. From time to time, a door would open and names would be called out. I glanced into the adjoining room and saw a Soviet colonel sitting at a desk, his chest covered with medals. Two civilians, strangers to me, flanked him.

The door closed again, opened again. My name was called. Suddenly, to my astonishment, a small boy of perhaps eight or nine rushed past me. He closed the door and I was left standing outside for about 10 minutes. Then the boy came out and flashed a smile at me.

They were calling my name again, so I went in. For what seemed an eternity I stood at attention before the tribunal. I felt as if they were piercing me with their eyes.

Finally, the colonel asked if I knew the boy who had just preceded me. I said I did not. He asked if I knew the janitor and I said I did. He asked if I knew why I was there and I said I believed the janitor must have accused me. He asked what had taken place at the apartment the previous day, and I described the incident with the clock. He asked what had happened to me during the war and I told him. He asked if I had been liberated by the Russians, and I replied, "Yes, I was. I owe my life to the Russians and I know it. It would never occur to me to make anti-Russian statements. It would be unthinkable."

The Russian colonel relaxed. The sternness fell from his face. "You're very lucky," he said. "The accusation against you was very serious and the punishment would have been many years in exile. But this child, of his own free will, came to tell us of a conversation he had overheard between the janitor and his wife. They were planning to fix the Jewish woman so that she couldn't claim her grandfather's house."

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I was speechless. Such courage on the part of a little child who did not even know me. So much cruelty in mankind, and so much kindness. So much pain in life, and so much joy.

I was free to go. My gratitude and relief were immense, but this incident permanently terrified me of the Russians and their arbitrary power.

I could not live off the charity of others forever. I had to pull my life together and go in search of Nick. The two of us had left some 5,000 Hungarian *Forint* up in the mountains during the Typhus epidemic, just before going to the ghetto. Despite inflation and the difficulty of currency exchanges, that sum would see me through a few months at least. We also had buried a two-carat diamond and some gold jewelry. Those would be useful when the money was gone.

If only I could get to them. If only they were still there.

Eugen, the former partisan, knew the countryside the way I knew the streets of Uzhorod. Although the war was not yet over and there was guerilla activity going on, he thought it best to leave at once. When peace came, the Russians would intensify their control and we might not be able to get through.

Eugen got hold of a horse and carriage and we drove to the mountains as if we had every right to be on the road. When we finally arrived in the village, it was late in the afternoon. The infirmary, we discovered, had been turned into a ward for senile patients. There were four men in the room where the money was hidden—very old, dying men, stretched out on four dilapidated metal beds.

No staff was in attendance. There was a critical shortage of medical personnel in the district, and the patients were lucky if someone looked in on them once or twice a day.

Eugen took one look and said the Hungarian equivalent of “No problem.” We went to town, hired a couple of sturdy young peasants and brought them back with us after nightfall. Without questioning us, the peasants obeyed our instructions and carried the beds into

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the courtyard, with the patients still in them. Then I searched with a flashlight until I found the right piece of flooring. I lifted it and there it all was, just as we had left it.

My trembling hands took up those folded thicknesses of newspaper, with the money and jewelry inside. I wept, partly with gratitude, partly with grief. When these things had been buried, all my loved ones were still alive.

Then I got up and looked through a window into the courtyard. The frail old men lay unconscious in their beds, covered by white sheets, their faces like skulls. Above them, the sky was dark but studded with stars. A full moon was rising among them, casting a slanted silver light over the courtyard and the forest beyond. Everything was hushed, strange, uncanny.

How beautiful, I thought. Like a Surrealist painting.

A painting! How long had it been since such a thought had entered my mind? I was suddenly overwhelmed with appreciation at being alive and having eyes to see. It was as if the whole mystery of my life—and of life itself—now lay before me, in that dreamlike, moonlit scene.