

# My Third Life

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## *In Transition*



Life in Decin had much in its favor. The town was attractive. Other refugees from the Uzhorod region were settling there, and we were meeting cultured and educated people. But there were desperate shortages, especially of food, and severe rationing had been imposed.

The constant gnawing of hunger was intolerable to both of us. At night it would wake me with dreams of the camps and the long march. Nick had survived because he was put in charge of the camp bloodhounds and could eat their leftovers. He needed no reminders of such degradation.

Remembering the bounty back home in Karpathia, we decided on a trip to Sobrance. Unlike Uzhorod, Sobrance was still under Czech administration. Perhaps we could live there, we thought, working the land and growing our own food. If not, we could at least bring some provisions back with us. With any luck, we could also get Mariska out of Uzhorod. She was not at all happy working for the Russian official, she had told me. She wanted to work for us again.

For a variety of reasons, it seemed better if I went alone. I took a train to Kosice, then made my way to Sobrance. Food was plentiful and I stocked up. But the news there was troubling. Uzhorod was in process of being officially annexed by Russia, while Sobrance would remain Czech. It was no longer possible to move freely between them.

The implications were frightening. Nick and I were Hungarian-

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speaking Jews who had been born in Slovakia less than ten miles apart. At the time of Nick's birth, the entire district had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By the time I was born, it all belonged to Czechoslovakia. Now, thanks to another redrawing of the map, my hometown was Czech while his was Soviet.

So what were we? Both Czechs? One Czech, one Soviet? Both Soviets? Could someone come and separate us again, perhaps forever? Or force both of us to live in Russia?

My strongest impulse was to get away as fast as I could.

But we had promised to fetch Mariska and she was expecting us. There were also some family things I wanted from Uzhorod. Since Nick was now a native born Russian, he would never dare go into Russian territory. I must go alone.

This was arranged with surprising ease. A friend of ours put me in touch with a touring theatrical troupe, presently in Kosice and booked to go on to Uzhorod. The director, Ptacek, agreed to take me along, posing as his wife. I counted on my friend, Eugen, with his intimate knowledge of the countryside, to get me back to Sobrance somehow, hopefully with Mariska.

The trip turned out to be great fun, at first. We formed quite a convoy—two cars to carry the performers and several trucks filled with their luggage and sets. The actors were a rollicking bunch and I fit right in. At the border, I clowned around with the director, and the guards never questioned my identity.

I was exhilarated. Everything was going to work out. But when we arrived in Uzhorod, Ptacek dropped a bombshell in my lap. He had fallen in love with me, he said. I must marry him. I could join the troupe.

At first I was sure this was a joke. It wasn't. Then I imagined he could be reasoned out of it. I reminded him of my situation—of the camps and my recent reunion with my husband. Nothing seemed to penetrate. He loved me. I must marry him. And if I didn't, he would turn me in as a spy. I could beg and cry all

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I wanted, he said, but it was either he or a Russian firing squad.

I realized I was dealing with a lunatic. Fortunately, he was gentleman enough, or confident enough, to let me live at Ami's while I thought over his proposal. Also, fortunately, he had to go to Kiev for three days. Once he had left, Ami went to Eugen, who arranged for me to cross the border in a peasant's manure wagon. I made the trip buried in manure up to the neck, with a tarpaulin thrown over the manure and me. I could hardly believe that such a repulsive plan would work, but it did.

I was restored to Nick, though without Mariska. My mind was made up. I would never go near the Soviet border again.

I settled down again in Decin, thankfully reconciled to whatever shortages and hardships lay ahead. Our minds were fixed on staying there for the rest of our lives. But a few months later, we received a message from Zoltan, Nick's childhood friend and my brothers' former tutor, now head of the Secret Service in Prague.

He wanted to see us at once.

We hastened to Prague and appeared in his office at the appointed time. He got right down to business. The Soviets were going to repatriate all their citizens now living in Czechoslovakia. This meant Nick and me. Zoltan was giving us this prior notice as a favor, so we could get ready.

The subtext of this message was clear: Get out while you can.

But where were we to go? My younger brother, Laci, was in Palestine, but Palestine was firmly closed to Jewish immigration. Nick had a much older brother, Ernest, who had gone to America when Nick was five or six years old. But we had no idea where he lived or if he were still alive. There were literally millions of displaced persons still wandering around Europe looking for homes. Without a sponsor, it was virtually hopeless to expect any free country to take us in.

And there were not just the two of us anymore. Nick's older brother, Hugo, had also survived the camps. One day he had

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appeared at our door, a walking skeleton, and he was now recovering with us in Decin.

We went to the Red Cross. They suggested that Ernest might be found by placing a notice in an American Hungarian-language paper. We placed the notice and waited in sickening anxiety.

And then came a telegram. But not from Ernest.

I have said it and I will say it again: Every survivor's story is a story of miracles. The odds were so stacked against us that nothing but miracles could have brought any of us through.

The telegram that suddenly arrived at our door said only, "*Letter, package follows. Love Tibor.*"

Tibor Borgida! He had been a childhood friend of Nick's, a very dear and close friend, who had left Czechoslovakia in 1938, right after Munich. His promised letter arrived a week later and explained everything.

Tibor was now living in America and married to an American woman named Lee. He worked for the Voice of America. He had been seeking his family survivors through the lists available from the Red Cross, but there were none. Then he had found Nick's name. As far as Tibor was concerned, Nick and I were his family now. If we wanted to come to America, he would sponsor us. Normally, sponsors were supposed to be relatives, but Tibor had influence, thanks to his job. An exception could be made. Besides, he had found Nick's brother, Ernest, through the Red Cross. Ernest was retired in Florida and had little money, but could be a co-sponsor. Did we want to come? Should they put the wheels in motion?

We wrote back immediately. Of course we would come. Or, at least, Nick would. I would stay behind in Czechoslovakia until he could send for me.

It was not that I didn't want to go, or that we desired a separation. We simply assumed I'd be a burden. Neither of us knew any English. It would be hard enough for Nick to find work, learn English, and see about getting licensed to practice medicine,

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without having to worry about supporting a wife. The tradition had always been for the husband to go first, establish a livelihood, then send for his wife. Nothing else made any sense.

Tibor's reply astounded me. I must come to America, he said. Nick needed me there. I had to support him until he had his medical license. I had to pay the bills. I had to put him through school. In America this was done all the time.

We had never heard of such a thing. A wife putting her husband through school? And what kind of job could I get?

But Mother had raised me to be a willow, not an oak. If Tibor said this is how it was done in America, then I could bend and learn the American way. Besides, the very idea was new and exciting, a challenge—like America itself. I realized how much I wanted to leave Europe—with all its evil associations—behind.

We wired him at once. Gisel will come too. Put the wheels in motion.