

*To America*

**I**t had never occurred to me that I would someday go to America. America was only a little less remote than the moon. I had seen it in movies, yes, but these had portrayed a land unbelievably exotic.

In American movies, many people were cowboys or gangsters. It seemed everyone had cars, lived in houses full of machinery, and, whatever their social class, dressed more or less alike. In American movies, there were no foreign armies of occupation, no hordes of beggars, no proud ruined nobles, no peasants in native costumes, no brilliant intellectuals, no donations to dowries for daughters of the poor. There were no toothless crones bent over sticks, or people who lived side-by-side through the generations without a common language. There were no cold-eyed men who suddenly appeared out of nowhere to send you to be tortured, exiled, shot, gassed, or burned.

Such a country was virtually unimaginable and did not seem real at all. And yet we were going there.

Getting out of Czechoslovakia posed no problem. A year later, after the Iron Curtain came down, it would have been impossible. But in 1946, the routes to the West were still wide open. We simply applied for our passports and exit visas and waited for them to come.

Following Tibor's instructions, we went directly to Paris and paid for passage on a Cunard Line ship. We were told we would have to wait until space became available. Most ships were still being used for military purposes.

There was another couple with us, Absi and Edith Golan, old friends who had been sponsored by their own American relatives.

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We would all be traveling together, along with their baby daughter, Evike.

After buying our tickets, Nick and I had less than enough cash to survive in Paris for a month. We still had our handful of gold jewelry and a single two-carat diamond, but these were our insurance; all we had to fall back on in case things did not work out for us.

It was now the first spring following the war. Paris was lovelier than it would ever be again. The chestnuts were blooming, the wide boulevards were free of traffic, the museums were empty of tourists, the air was sweet and innocent of exhaust fumes, and the moonlit walks by the Seine were gloriously romantic. But after the first few days we could take little pleasure in these attractions. All we wanted was to get away before our money ran out.

Weeks passed. Finally, in desperation, Nick went back to the Cunard office and paid our last \$100 as a "bonus." Before he had a chance to get back to the hotel, Cunard called to inform us that we were to leave from Rouen in the morning. We just made the night train, arriving in that charming port city at dawn.

We were booked on the Francis de Coolkins, a "Liberty" cargo ship returning empty from France to Baltimore. There was a crew of about 20, and it had room for 12 passengers. The trip would take 15 days. When the captain learned Nick was a doctor, he was delighted, as there was no other medical personnel aboard.

There were only two cabins. Absi, Edie and Evika were given one. I was to share the other with a French war bride. Nick and the other male passengers were to bunk below, in a kind of dormitory.

The French war bride was very young and very pretty. She and her family shared a tearful farewell all over our cabin. Her parents had begged me to look after their "little girl," leaving home for the first time to join her American husband. I promised I would and they kissed me many times in gratitude. But no sooner did we set sail than this "little girl" began her extraordinary exploits among the male passengers and crew. Night and day, men lined up at our

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cabin door, and what happened when they got inside made all hope of sleep impossible. I ended up bunking below with the men, modestly curtained behind towels hung from an improvised clothesline.

I enjoyed that crossing as I had enjoyed nothing in years, even during the storms. The American crew was friendly and full of fun. They not only had a very good time with the French war bride, they had quite a different sort of good time with me. They talked to me about America and took turns giving me English lessons, bursting into laughter at my endless mistakes.

Nick did not study English with me. He was much too seasick. From the moment the ship left the port, he was confined to his bunk in utmost misery. Part of it was true motion sickness. But much of it was his profound anxiety over our future.

In later years, Nick would describe his first year in America with a powerful metaphor. He felt, he said, as if he had been parachuted into a desert without a compass or a map. He was almost more afraid of America than he had been of the camps.

His birthday came in the middle of the voyage. The crew and I planned a surprise party. Wearing trousers and neckties, but no shirts, the sailors arrived to carry Nick up to the deck. The last 100 eggs on board had gone into making the cake, and the crew presented us with silver dollars for a good-luck present. Everyone on board was invited and they all sang "Happy Birthday." It was a wonderful party, the kind that the Nick I had once known would have enjoyed mightily. But the present Nick could barely muster a smile.

There was something very beautiful in the light-heartedness of the Americans. I remembered having been that way once. And I would be that way again, I vowed. I would look forward, not back.