

## *A Frightening Experience*



One reason we had been saving money so frantically was to carry out a plan. Someone had told Edith Golan that good money could be made during the summer by running a rooming house in Saratoga. I investigated and discovered that Saratoga was a hot springs resort in the forests of upstate New York. I knew all about hot springs and forests, of course, having come from Sobrance. Older people, all quite dignified and refined, went to such places to “take the waters.”

For many months, Edith and I saved and borrowed whatever we could. In the end, we signed a contract with a Mr. S., to lease a small hotel. It never occurred to us that anyone would cheat two young, hardworking, recent immigrants who barely knew English. We were mistaken.

In time we discovered we had been charged at least double the going rate, and there was no way that we could earn enough to make money. The best we could do was cover our costs and repay our debts.

Saratoga had nothing of the elegance and dignity of Sobrance. The guests were disappointing. Many were old ladies who seemed resentful of our youth and energy. They became all the more resentful when they discovered we were married to professional men. There was no end to the heavy things they wanted us to schlep for them—mattresses, tables, chairs, and heavy trunks. They called us greenhorns and plainly regarded us as inferiors. And this was no mere job I could walk away from. I had leased the place and had responsibilities.

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The male guests were no better. Many were habitual gamblers out to have a good time. They came on to us by flashing their bankrolls or their latest winnings, asking us to go out or expecting to buy a night's favors. But give them a day or two at the track, and they would be begging for their bus fare home. Faced with a choice between paying the fare or trying to evict a non-paying guest, we usually paid the fare.

The summer seemed like a total loss, moneywise. The only thing in its favor was that it spared me the heat and humidity Nick had to endure in Kansas City. We wrote to each other almost daily, and all his letters had what looked like watermarks. I finally asked whether he was crying so much because he missed me. He answered that he was not crying at all. He wrote me while sitting in the bathtub because it was the only place where he could keep cool. It was the bathwater that splashed on the paper.

One day an elderly man named David came to the hotel. David, for a wonder, seemed civilized. When he asked if I would go with him to the races, I accepted. He said that the minimum bet was two dollars, so I took along six. I would bet three times, I decided, and that was all.

As soon as we got near the track, David suddenly stopped hobbling and virtually began to run. I could not believe the energy he derived from getting in smelling distance of a bet. He insisted that I bet on the first race and that I let him choose the horse. I agreed, which was fortunate, because I won \$134.00 on a two-dollar bet. The thrill was unbelievable. I made up my mind to use this money to salvage the summer.

For seventy dollars, I bought Nick a round-trip ticket to Saratoga. His summer term was nearly over and he came as soon as it was finished. Once Edith and I closed down the hotel, Nick and I went off together. Niagara Falls was nearby. It was said to be a lovely place. A place for lovers. And so we went.

The Falls were well worth seeing, even if somewhat cheapened by their man-made surroundings. We had a very happy two days.

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Then it happened: We got on the train back to Kansas City, but hadn't realized it would pass through Canada first. We would not have been much disturbed even if we had realized this. After all, when it came to things like identification papers, things were so casual in America. We did not have to carry passports or things of that sort. It never occurred to us to take our documents to Niagara Falls. The shock came when we returned to the border. Those who appeared to be native-born Americans were passed through whether they had passports or not. We, however, were stopped.

An official questioned us coldly. Who were we? Where did we come from? Why were we traveling without documents? What was our purpose in trying to get into the United States? Why were we trying to avoid Immigration?

His disapproving look was the look we had seen on the faces of Nazis. We were shaken to the soul. We tried to explain, but nothing impressed him. We would have to face a judge, he said.

He took us off the train, accompanied us to a courtroom, and sat with us, guarding us. Nick managed to ask, "What do you think will happen?"

"You'll have to go back to where you came from," he said. "That is, if you're not tried for spying."

A strange calm descended on me. I seemed to hear my mother's voice. "*Be a willow,*" it said. "*Bend.*" But Nick looked like a man who was about to be broken.

At last, we went into the courtroom. The judge, in his black robe, sat high above us. He listened to the arresting officer, then asked us to explain.

Nick and I took turns. We told him where we had come from and what we were doing in America and how we happened to be passing through Canada at this time. We apologized for not carrying our passports, and not knowing we would need them between Niagara Falls and Kansas City. We pleaded with him to call Dean Reinhard and have him confirm our story.

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The judge nodded. He believed us, he said. We were free to continue on. But as soon as we got to Kansas City, we must get our passports, take them to the nearest Immigration Office, fill out some forms and then forward them to him.

Had we been ordinary people, with a normal life behind us, things would have reassured us entirely. We would have gone home without a worry in the world. But we were not ordinary people. We were survivors of the longest, most pervasive living nightmare of our times.

We went home and did what we were told. The moment of greatest horror came at the Immigration Office. Nick, especially, was terrified that some small error in filling out the forms would do us in forever. In the Europe we had left, there was no more damning statement than hearing, "Your papers are not in order." To make matters worse, the clerk at Immigration kept our passports.

What if this were some trick? Someone would come by requesting to see our passports and we would not have them.

We went home. The sense of doom was still upon us. I had little doubt that we would have to leave America. But we had survived until now and I was convinced we would survive again. We would survive, no matter what.

Nick could not take the prospect so calmly. He had never rejoiced in America as I had done. His heart had remained in Czechoslovakia, yearning for the life and the family he had lost. Now, at last, the realization came to him that nothing of that existed any more. Our homeland belonged to others. Our way of life had ceased to be. Uzhorod was not home anymore. It was a graveyard, a haunted house.

Uzhorod, Czechoslovakia, Europe—they were the past. America was the present. America was the future. America had been good to us in many ways he had not been able to appreciate. But he was appreciating them now. With all his being, he wanted to stay. He wanted to stay in America more than he had ever wanted anything—except to live through the war and to find me alive.

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We waited for three endless weeks. Then one day the mail arrived, bringing a small packet from the Immigration Service. Inside were our passports and an almost casual notice that assured us our worries were over. Instantly, a change came over my husband that was no less than a transformation. He smiled a smile that never again quite left his face. Nick had discovered himself and discovered his destiny. He had discovered America.