

## *Love Knows No Boundaries*



There is a thing I sometimes say to people that makes them very angry. Except for the loss of my loved ones, I tell them, I do not regret the suffering I experienced in the camps.

“Are you crazy? How can you say that?” they demand. “How can you find anything good in anything so horrible? What are you, a masochist?”

Yet I feel it is true that my year of suffering was the making of me. Nietzsche said that “*what does not kill me makes me stronger,*” and I feel that this is a great truth. Because of the camps, I learned that one can go down to the very lowest possible level of existence, and even seem to be dehumanized, and yet return to life again and build something of beauty and value.

My experience of the camps not only made me stronger, it gave me the consciousness to appreciate happiness. It gave me an appreciation for life which very few people know. Nick also developed this appreciation. It has become one of the strongest bonds between us.

For me, every meal is a joy, a celebration. I see all around me people who eat on the run, hardly tasting their food. I pity them. I do my own cooking and make sure everything I serve will give me enjoyment. I don’t have “everyday” china and silver, keeping the best for guests. Nick and I are our own guests, and we use a nice setting, even at the breakfast table in the kitchen. We take our time over even the simplest meal and relish every bite. When I visit Hawaii, I make myself the same lunch every day—freshly picked

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papaya with cottage cheese. It tastes so wonderful that I think about it even when I'm not there.

It's the same with everything. For years after coming to America, I retained a phobic terror of lice. I would get up several times a night to examine my white sheets. Then printed linens came on the market. After that, I would buy or make only the most beautiful or elaborately patterned sheets, so that it would have been useless to look for lice, even if they had been there. I also started wearing black, sexy underclothes. My phobia was overcome, and I got so much enjoyment out of these new habits that they were a real gift to me.

My marriage is a very great gift to me. I feel terribly sorry for people who don't appreciate their spouses, or who hate the opposite sex, or who politicize personal relations. I wake up and see Nick beside me, miraculously restored to me, still at my side 48 years after our reunion; still loving me with the same commitment that was in his smile when we passed at Auschwitz. I remember a conversation with Margaret as a child, when she said with some envy that some of her classmates had "a lot of mommies and daddies" and got a lot more presents. I could tell her with perfect certainty that she would have to be content with only one mommy or daddy, because neither of us had any intention of giving her any more.

Nick and I share many interests, values and opinions, but we also have our differences. When these come up, I tend to be critical and argumentative, while he is tolerant. In the end, when I say, "I don't know why you insist on disagreeing with me about thus-and-so," he will smile and say, "We disagree because I am Nick and you are Gisel."

He is right, of course, and I am grateful for that too. It would be rather dull if we thought alike and felt alike about everything.

I appreciate the beauty of nature and life and art with a keenness honed by long exposure to man-made ugliness. In the camps, both human beings and their environment were reduced to their

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most repellent aspects. But I never accepted that these were the ultimate truth about life and humanity. I clung to my faith that beauty and love are just as real as ugliness and hatred. I chose to make beauty and love the foundation of my life and to put forth a conscientious effort to achieve them.

Today I still feel that the quality of life is what is most important. I am appalled when dying people are kept alive artificially for no purpose but to prolong their suffering. This is barbaric torture, and I will never allow it to be done to my husband or myself. When the right time comes, Nick and I will probably choose our own death, perhaps together. This will not be an act of despair but an assertion of our dignity. And we will hope that no one will mourn.

I appreciate what my experience has taught me about bearing with suffering. I tend to have periodic depressions, which I don't necessarily blame on the war. Nick went through experiences similar to mine and he does not get depressed.

Jewish holidays are a particularly difficult time. They bring back so many memories, so many losses, so much pain. I remember such happy times. But the happier the memories, the more they hurt. I go to the synagogue to pray, but I feel remote from the people around me. Each year as the holidays approach, I wish I could leave the planet until they are over.

Yet even then my experience comes to the rescue. I remember what I endured and how I survived. Even deep in grief, I can remind myself to appreciate my daily pleasures—the taste of food, the sight of sky and water, the nearness of Nick, the loyalty of my friends, the love of my child—and hold onto these blessings reverently until my grief passes. When morbid thoughts come to me, I remember the slogan I taught myself in the camps: *“Not here. Not now. I can always do it later.”* And this sustains me.

I believe in the power of love. Like hatred, it knows no borders or boundaries. Over vast distances of space and time I have continued to stay in contact with Ami and Gitu and so many others. From

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time to time, some of them have reappeared in our lives. Eugen, the partisan, got out somehow and now lives in New York. Zoltan, who gave us the warning to get out of Czechoslovakia, defected, appeared for a while, then disappeared again. My brother, Laci, left Israel and lived in America very happily until his death. Nick's surviving brother lives in New York.

We have been back to Europe several times. When Margaret was 12, we took her with us. But for the most part these trips have not been a success. Eastern Europe is a gloomy and oppressive place and the people are very poor. It is painful, even embarrassing for someone like myself, who has so much, to visit someone like Gitu, who lives in Israel and has so little. She shows her bitterness and resentment, and I feel almost guilty for my many blessings. Yet it is wrong to feel guilty about having blessings. I only wish she had more of them.

I find nothing to be nostalgic about in the drab misery of Czechoslovakia, Russia and Hungary. Nor do I consider them my homeland any more. America is my homeland.

That is something else I owe to the camps. Coming to America from Europe, I appreciate it as few Americans do. After what I have seen and what I have been through, I can see the greatness of this country with the same clarity that I see the glory of the sky and the wonder of art. Even so, I am no chauvinist. Love knows no borders or boundaries. This story, I hope, has been a story of love.

That I am alive today, and that I have lived so productively, I owe to the love of so many who I wish to mention again:

To my mother, who taught me to be strong and self-reliant,

To my father, who taught me to enjoy life,

To Nick, whose smile and love gave me purpose and hope,

To Margaret, who provided me with the joy and challenge of being her mother,

To Laci and Bandi, my two wonderful brothers,

To the Tomcsany family, who twice saved Nick's life,

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To Gitu, who stopped me from suicide,  
To the mayor of that town who kept us from being shot and  
gave us breakfast,  
To Relly, who fed me and kept me alive in the barn,  
To Ami, who took me in when I returned from the camp,  
To Mariska, who kept my family pictures,  
To Eugen, who risked his life for me,  
To the old German, who brought Nick and me back together,  
To Zoltan, who warned us to get out in time,  
To Tibor, who brought us to America,  
To Lee, who took me under her wing in New York,  
To Dean Reinhard, who was so kind to Nick at the dental  
school,  
To the judge who believed our story and let us come home,  
To the Lagawiers, who did everything for us in Seattle,  
To Fred and Andree Picard, who brought me forward as an  
artist,  
To Marilyn and Grace, who encouraged me to write this book,  
In my life, your acts were miracles, no less than God's wonders  
at the Red Sea. Most of you owed me nothing, yet you gave me  
everything. To you, I dedicate my book, and to so many others, I  
owe my life. As my sculpture preserves in memory the victims of  
hate, may this book preserve in memory the givers of love.  
*Lo Tishkach.*