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The Shadows Lengthen



Since the signing of the Munich Pact in 1939, life for Uzhorod's Jews had grown steadily harder. There were repressive ordinances followed by more repressive ordinances. Trade licenses were revoked and the Jewish population was heavily assessed to pay for the war effort. Blackmail and bribery became a way of life. Yet Nick and I, young and in love, could not help but be happy.

All day long, we looked forward to our evening walk. However grim the future looked, we smiled at the mere sight of each other. We lived from day to day, fearing what might come next, hoping against hope that the situation would improve, yet unwilling to take any steps, including marriage.

In the world outside our little town, great and terrible events kept happening. In September 1939, Hitler had taken Poland. There was a lull of some months, then most of Western Europe was invaded and fell. England stood alone, suffering horrendous daily bombings. Each of these events was a terrible blow, and made our own prospects seem more terrible. Yet, ironically, because a Nazi ally already occupied us, we were better off for the moment than most Europeans. There were no battles or bombings near Uzhorod, and there was plenty of food and free access to goods through neutral Switzerland.

Still, there was no question we were at war—and on the side of Germany. Everywhere, young Gentiles were in uniform. Jews were also being conscripted for “working brigades.” Soon, all Jewish males between 18 and 45 were subject to forced labor. Some worked

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within the country, while others were sent to German-occupied Poland. Those notified to report had only a day or two to wind up their affairs. In a matter of hours, entire families went from survival to destitution. Their breadwinners were taken away and households fell apart.

Labor on the brigades was harsh and unrelenting. The men were put to work fixing bombed railroad tracks or building roads and military fortifications in anticipation of a Russian invasion. The food ration was minimal, the brutality constant, and no communication was permitted with families. The only news came via returning servicemen, and it was seldom good. Constant beatings, exhaustion, sickness and malnutrition took many lives. The Hungarian guards were merciless and cruel.

Since Hungary was now a German puppet, Nazi organizations had sprung up everywhere. Many Gentiles were sympathizers, and those who were not had to conform or endure the consequences. People changed so drastically that we never knew what to expect. Old friends turned their backs on us or became openly hostile.

Fortunately, Nick was acquainted through his work with the governor of our territory, a fine gentleman named Tomcsanyi Vilmos Pal. His family had been prominent for many generations and even the pro-Nazis accepted his leadership. This good man came to our rescue more than once.

Jewish professionals were having their licenses revoked. Eventually it was Nick's turn, and he could no longer practice medicine. The accusation was "lack of proof of loyalty to the Hungarian regime." Little could be done about such meaningless charges, but Nick was not the kind to sit and do nothing. Fortunately, the governor and his wife were Nick's patients. Nick telephoned the governor's wife, who was his patient, and told her what had happened. She promised to speak to her husband, and within days Nick received word that he could practice again.

Few other Jews were lucky enough to have such good

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connections. Each day, more of our men were taken from their homes, tortured and killed. The remaining Jewish community did its best to help their families. Volunteers went from place to place each week to make collections. Nick, of course, was a generous contributor.

One Wednesday afternoon, just as he was about to close his office, two plainclothes policemen showed up and took him away. The charge this time was giving money to an underground anti-Hungarian movement. More than 40 years later, I still find it unbearably painful to describe what he endured over the next two days.

First, he was forced into a car and driven some 30 miles to a neighboring town, where an old castle served as the local headquarters of the Secret Service. All the way to this infamous place of torture, he was roughed up and threatened. Once there, his possessions were confiscated and he was put in a large, dark room with rows of other prisoners, all sitting on the floor. He was ordered to keep his head bowed and not look at anyone.

The guards walked up and down the rows, smashing heads with rifle butts and kicking their prisoners as hard and as often as they pleased. A radio was blaring loudly, and they kept shouting over the noise, "Do not look at your neighbor." Even if Nick had dared to look, it would have been virtually impossible to recognize anyone, since the place was almost totally dark. After some three or four hours, Nick was struck hard on the head, then told to follow a soldier who kept his rifle pointed on him as they left the room.

The radio was blasting away in the corridor too, but it failed to drown out the screams that came from behind the doors. Nick was put in a small room. Two men came in and tied him to a bench with leather strips. One strap went across his hips so his hands were immobilized, then his legs were bound. Finally, a loop was tied around his scrotum.

The interrogation began. He was asked to name the underground organization to which he contributed. Before he could even

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reply, his interrogators pulled on the loop around his scrotum, causing him excruciating pain. One moment, Nick was insisting that he had no political affiliation of any kind. The next, he was shrieking in agony as they pulled on the loop. This went on until he passed out from the pain.

Meanwhile, Nick's nurse, Ami, had come in search of me. My first thought was to call the governor's home. His wife told me not to panic or do anything hasty, but to stay by the phone until she had contacted her husband and gotten back to me. I hung up and sat by the phone for hours. At last, she called to assure me that the governor had contacted the appropriate people and taken care of everything. She instructed me to go to the castle and wait outside. I must not go in, she warned, but simply sit and wait.

I phoned Ami and we went together. I could never have borne it alone. Ami was a Gentile girl about my own age, but she had been married to a Jew who had died on a work brigade. She was pretty, small and dark, and we were very fond of each other.

I began calling taxis to take us to the castle, but such was the fear of the place that most refused to go. Finally, I found a taxi driver who knew Nick and he agreed to make the trip and wait with us.

Ami and I cried the whole way in the taxi. I was afraid that the governor's efforts wouldn't work. We sat for several hours across from the Secret Service headquarters, fear building as we watched the steady procession of people being taken in. It was now long past the appointed hour and we did not know what to do. Then, a rifle-carrying militiaman came out with someone I barely recognized as Nick. His every feature was distorted with pain and horror.

The instant we got him into the cab, he broke down and sobbed uncontrollably. Ami and I were in tears again too.

After that, everything changed. Never again could we recapture the moments of cheerful optimism we had known in the past. Fear became constant. My brother, Bandi, was taken to a forced labor camp. Even so, he was lucky. There was now a shortage of labor, so

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there was less wanton killing. Laborers recuperated, so they could be worked again. After several months, Bandi came home—all skin and bones, but alive. It was strange to think that my playboy brother had survived such hardship, but he had. Not that he was a playboy any longer. He was a man who had looked upon horrors.

Somehow, everything that happened only served to bring Nick and me closer. We even began to feel differently about marriage. Before, we had not wanted to marry because we were hoping for things to get better. Now, that hope was nearly gone. We decided to make the most of whatever time we had, to live as man and wife, if only for a little while. In June of 1941 we gathered the family to celebrate our official engagement. Despite everything, we were extremely happy, but not for long.

On the 23rd of June, just a few days after our engagement party, Germany invaded Russia. Hungary, as Germany's military ally, was now at war with Russia too, and the army was called up. Within three days Nick was ordered to report to a medical unit. My mother tried to persuade me that it was not correct for a girl to follow her fiancé, but I wanted to be with Nick until the last possible minute. I went with him to his reporting destination at Szolos.

Nick was sent over the border into Russia. His medical unit was just behind the front lines, to care for wounded soldiers. Weeks went by with no word. Then someone returning from the front managed to post a letter he had written.

Nick had narrowly escaped death, ironically enough because he was a Jew. His unit had been moved to a small village in Russia, close to the Dneiper River, where fighting was fierce. The medical unit was accommodated in a school, but the two Jewish doctors—Nick and his colleague—were sent to sleep in a chicken house. That night, a bomb hit the school, killing all occupants. Nick and his colleague survived only because they had been segregated.

I spent the months Nick was away just waiting; waiting for the mail, waiting by the phone, waiting for news on the radio. Nick's

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elderly father and my grandparents visited frequently. I managed to keep busy. I spent a good deal of time on dressmaking, which I enjoyed. It occupied my days, allowed me to keep up a wardrobe, and provided me with a trousseau. I discovered that keeping up my appearance helped me to keep up my spirits—a lesson I have never forgotten.

Nick spoke Russian quite well, so he was used for special assignments. He might be sent to a village to trade cigarettes or medicine for eggs, chickens, and butter. His gray, non-military-looking outfit was fairly inconspicuous, and he would assure the Russians that he was not with a fighting unit. It was risky business, and the Russians were naturally suspicious, but they were eager for the supplies.

On one of these forays, a tall old man with a long beard—the very image of a Biblical patriarch, opened the door. As Nick gave his spiel, he had an intuition—the first with any Russian—that he was speaking with a fellow Jew. Gently, Nick asked if he might come inside. The man nodded silently.

Once indoors, Nick whispered that he was Jewish. The man stared piercingly at him, then walked by him toward the next room. As he passed, he murmured in Hebrew, “*Sh’ma Israel,*” (Hear, oh Israel) and Nick quickly replied “*Adonoi Alohenu, Adonoi Echad*” (The Lord is our God, the Lord is One.)

The old man threw himself on Nick and hugged him fiercely. Then they talked. The man had sent his family away to safety and was now alone in his house in the middle of the war zone. Nick was in a foreign country, attached to the army of a country that despised and persecuted Jews. The two men stood embracing each other, and soon both were crying from joy and sorrow.

Nick spent a wretched six months in Russia, always close behind the front lines. In early December 1941, there were fierce battles with many Hungarian casualties. Then, by an extraordinary chance, Nick encountered a German medical officer who had been a classmate of his at the German University in Prague. The man

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remembered him fondly, as Nick had tutored him in pathology. A group of Hungarian wounded was about to be shipped out on a Red Cross train, and this officer kindly designated Nick to accompany them home.

Nick telephoned from Kassa that he had just arrived with a trainload of wounded. After so many months of waiting, I nearly fainted—first from joy at unexpectedly hearing his voice, and then from fear that he was one of the wounded. Nick didn't know where he would be sent from there, but I caught the first train to Kassa. It was unbelievable bliss to be with him again.

I had taken as much money as I could quickly gather, just in case. Sure enough, it came in handy. Nick told me the name of his superior officer at Hungarian headquarters. Off I went to try my luck. I still don't know how I managed it, but somehow I bribed him to free Nick and let him stay home. I suspect it wasn't my personal charm, however great that might have been. It was the money that did it. All I remember is that I kept pushing bills into his pocket, smiling and kidding about what a terribly nice person he was, and begging him to accept this token of my appreciation. And so he did.

Nick and I returned home to Uzhorod the next day, both of us radiant with happiness. More than ever before, we realized that our lives hung by a thread and we had to make the most of the present.