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Marriage



We decided to get married as soon as possible. Arriving in Uzhorod on December 11, 1941, we settled on a Sunday afternoon 12 days away. We spoke to the rabbi and he was available. The reception would be at home. Food was still cheap and plentiful, and it was no problem to have a catered meal for 150. Everything was coming together very nicely.

The only problem was that there had to be a civil ceremony before the religious one. Three days before it was scheduled, I telephoned Nick at his office to call for an emergency meeting. According to our tradition, a young couple should abstain from seeing each other for a full week before the wedding, but this was no time for such niceties. I told him that there was something important that he should know before we married, something I could not explain on the phone. His cheerful tone of voice changed. Once I hung up, I realized what he must have been thinking: that I was not a virgin. I'd had a lover—an affair. Something serious. Of course, no one expected that a doctor in his 30s would come to his marriage a virgin. But it was different for the bride. The double standard affected the thinking even of people as essentially unconventional as Nick and me.

A couple of hours later, Nick arrived from his office. To relieve his mind, I made my confession quickly. Some years before, my grandfather had persuaded me to subtract two years from my age. I had become so used to my new age that I used it automatically. But I could hardly go before a judge and swear that I was twenty,

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when in fact I was 22. Nick broke into the biggest grin I'd ever seen.

We were married on Sunday, December 23, 1941. We took a rapid electric train called the Arpad to Budapest for our honeymoon. In spite of all the recent hardships, I had accumulated a sizable trousseau. I had bed covers from Switzerland, and hand-made nightgowns trimmed with lace, and all the lovely new dresses I'd made while Nick was at the front.

For 10 blissful days, we enjoyed Budapest and pretended that all was right with the world. Then we returned to Uzhorod. My mother had presented us with the family home for our wedding present. Nick moved his practice into the house, so we were under the same roof virtually all the time. My mother went on living in the house, looking after things, and we had an excellent cook, Mariska. Her devotion to us was rare and we owed much to her later on.

As had become our habit, we lived in two mental worlds at once—dreading the doom that hung over us, yet living as if a whole normal life lay ahead.

Like most newlyweds, we rearranged the house to our taste. My father had left me a large dowry, and we spent freely on redecoration. We ordered a new set of dining room furniture from a local craftsman and made daily visits to the fragrant woodworking shop to watch it being made. Our bedroom also got much attention. The new furniture was ivory-colored and I stretched blue and ivory fabric on the wall behind the bed.

One of our friends paid this room a compliment that I still cherish. This man was a prominent architect and a bridge partner of Nick's. He had a bad stammer and had remained a bachelor for a very good reason. The poor man was impotent—a fact which, somehow, was common knowledge.

Nick was eager to show off our decorating efforts to his illustrious friend, so we toured him around the house. When we reached the bedroom, the architect suddenly beamed and made a broad gesture with his arms. "In th-th-this room, in th-this room,

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even I c-c-c-could . . .” We all broke out laughing and he kept nodding his head in approval. “Yes, yes, yes . . .”

Then Nick was called for forced labor again. It was a terrible blow for us, but we accepted it. No communication was permitted, but after three weeks’ absence, Nick managed to smuggle a letter out. He was stationed close to the Romanian border. He included the name of the town and also of the person in charge. He asked if I could try to deliver a “special gift” to the head of his camp.

I understood perfectly. So, once again, I gathered up money for a bribe and set out for the Romanian border. I felt no qualms whatever about making these bribes. Why should our sworn enemies work Nick to death? I was glad I had the money, and only wished that everyone were so fortunate. I dressed discreetly but attractively, and went by train.

The camp was the most desolate place I had ever seen. It was in a vast swamp with few buildings and many fierce dogs roaming freely. Here and there boards had been laid over the ooze to form crude walkways. I had to jump from plank to plank to keep from sinking in mud to my ankles. Asking directions from guards, I was challenged with coarse remarks, but I did not react and was soon directed to the headquarters.

It was late afternoon by the time I located Nick’s supervisor. After waiting about an hour I saw a man in uniform go in. I wanted to let him relax a while, so I waited until the sun was almost down. Then I knocked at the door.

A suspicious woman of about 50 admitted me and then retreated to another room. It was darker now than I had wished it to be, and a little lamp was burning on a crude tabletop in the kitchen where the supervisor sat. Two big, chained dogs barked wildly at me as the supervisor looked me up and down. I tried what had worked when I made my first bribe—praising, asking, begging, and finally tucking the money in his pocket and hoping for the best. Then I quickly retreated into the dark, making my way over mud-slick

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boards back to the road and the nearby town. I waited through the night in a horrible little hotel. The next morning I went to the railroad station to return to Uzhorod. There, waiting on the platform, was my most wonderful reward. Nick and I returned home together.

In just a few days it seemed as if he had never been gone. Everything was back to “normal,” with Nick working each day at his office. We were happy for each day that we had in peace together. Nick had some high-ranking private officials and military personnel as patients. Most of them would not come openly to his office because he was Jewish, so Nick saw them late in the evening. During the next two years I sometimes returned the after-dark visits because Nick needed a favor from these men. I never offered a gift of money without it having been accepted. In this I was lucky. If anyone had felt insulted by the offer, it could well have been the end of me.

Nick and I were lucky indeed to be able to afford bribes. Most people could not, and suffered the consequences. Having means bought us a little delay of danger, a little more time together. But in the period that was coming, all would be equal. There would be no way out for anyone.