

FIRST LOVE

by *Judita Hruza*

Falling in love for the first time is an important milestone in everybody's life. My milestone came at a highly unexpected time: It was the first year of WWII, Summer of 1940. I was home for my school vacation in our little town called Nagyszollos Hungary, not yet visibly affected by the war: there were no air raids and the life went on as before, that is for people who were not Jewish. Each day new laws appeared regulating the existence of Jews in Hungary. These laws stripped us of our right to go to school (higher than the elementary), to hold jobs, to own businesses, to earn a living. In our Jewish community people were deported if they could not prove their Hungarian roots. Jewish men 18-45 were sent to forced labor camps. We were not wearing the ominous yellow star yet, but we were easily recognizable from our worried expressions. We were living under a doom, in a state of collective psychological depression.

Our apprehension grew when a military company came to our town. There were rumors of atrocities committed against Jews by the soldiers. My family was ordered to accommodate 2 officers in our spare room. After they had moved in, a third officer knocked on our door at 11pm. He apologized profusely for his lateness; "I had to see to my troop's accommodations first," he said and produced a slip of occupancy with our address on it.

He looked incredibly young, strikingly handsome and painfully exhausted. When he heard that the room was already taken, he started to leave, with new apologies. Suddenly, to my own surprise I heard myself saying: "Please, don't go! You can have my room. I'll sleep in the living room." My mother's puzzled expression changed to comprehension and she

joined me in persuading the lieutenant to stay.

From this day on, I lived for the moment when our guest—Gabor—walked through the door. My nagging fears and depression disappeared like by magic. I listened adoringly when he talked with my mother about his family, his fiancée, his plans for the future. The fact that he was madly in love with his "Treasure" (as he called her) did not matter to me the least: it added to his fairy-tale quality. He stood far beyond my reach for heavier reasons, than by being engaged: he had come from a world that was light years away from mine, a world where the rules differed diagonally from those that applied to me. I was fascinated with this other world, where people could live without anticipation of catastrophes every moment. Gabor was apparently ashamed for the anti-Jewish laws and he was extremely respectful to us. He brought little thoughtful presents and kissed my mother's hand after each meal. I basked in these expressions of kindness and felt safe and protected just being in his proximity.

I was diligently doing favors for him, just to please him. When "Treasure's" framed picture broke, I had the glass replaced from my allowance. When Gabor complimented the beautiful giant daisies in our garden (his girlfriend's favorites) I wrapped a bunch in moist moss and prepared a package for her. I even mailed the parcel. I was preoccupied with this Prince Charming and at times felt a pang of guilt for not sharing in the general gloom of my people. My mother reassured me: "Sweetheart, you have the right to be sixteen. It's not your fault it came at a bad time. You are entitled to your dreams. Enjoy them."

Enjoy I did. I still can feel the thrill of my first grown up dinner date in the best restaurant in town. Gabor invited me there after having asked my mother's permission.

The army left at the end of the Summer. The dreaded farewell was softened by his last words. I wished him good luck and happiness and asked him not to be disappointed if his first child would be a girl. He responded: "I won't if she turns out as you, Judit."

I returned to school to Budapest and my memories from the summer no longer dominated my life.

It was fifty years later, when I discovered his name in a phone book, upon my first visit to Hungary after the revolution in 1990. I called with trepidations: will he remember me? He did and was excited that I was alive. We met and exchanged our life stories. I told him about the Holocaust where my entire family was killed, only my brother and I survived. The good things in my new life: becoming and MD, getting married and having a new family, complete with children and grandchildren; moving through Europe and finally settling in the USA.

Gabor told me about his marriage after his return from the Russian front where he was wounded. After his daughter (Judit) was born, he was sent back to the front because a fellow officer saw him defending a Jewish woman from an abusive guard. He was reported to his commanding officer for being a Jew-lover. This time he became a POW and was not allowed to return home until 1947, two years after the war had ended.

His home country would not forgive him for his status in the army. "I was second rate citizen," he said rue-

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fully. Both he and his wife had to move and find jobs; Judit was not accepted to the university. Slowly things changed for the better but then his wife died. He lives alone and complements his modest pension by tutoring high school students. His daughter and grandson are his greatest pride and happiness.

I told him about my crush on him 50 years before and he blushed. I told him what it meant to me that he was so decent and kind to us in those mean and evil times. "I can never repay you this," I said. "You just did," Gabor said and the gallant officer and

gentleman kissed my hand.

Then he showed me a letter. The handwriting was familiar and it took my breath away. It was my mother's! She was sending her best wishes for Christmas to Gabor's mother and asked her whether she had any news from her son because she herself had not heard from him in 3 months. On the other side of the paper, Gabor's mother wrote a prayer begging for her son's safe return from the front.

Our friendship renewed, it has come to a full circle. At my annual visits to Budapest I am being received like a princess, who had come from this faraway fairytale land all the way across the Ocean. ☆