

The Resourceful Heart

By Max Willi Fischer

Old Hugo nickered as Maria pitched some hay into his stall. A sliver of daylight streamed through the unlatched door. She heard Zeppel, the Border Collie, bark outside. The cavernous interior of the barn muffled the dog's alarm, but her heart already diverted her mind. Six weeks after the war's end and with Russians spread throughout the forested Sudeten range in northwestern Czechoslovakia, hope of Bruno's survival occupied most of her waking moments.

Maria wiped her wispy brown hair across her wide forehead. She snatched a moment to lean against the pitchfork and gaze at her wedding band. From her first date with Bruno two years earlier—a picture show in Prague—to their wedding in Dresden two evenings before its incendiary destruction four months ago, the promise of happily ever after with him became her antidote to this toxic time.

She took a measured scoop of feed from a wooden bin and walked onto the barnyard, scattering it among the bobbing hens. Mid-June's humidity seemed more pressing in the scattered sunlight than in the shade of the barn.

She reentered the barn and dropped the scoop into the bin before closing its lid. Sprinting footsteps and the creaking door caught her off guard. Day morphed into night as a smelly hand wrapped itself around her mouth.

“What do we have here...a fine German wench...or is she Czech?” The stranger in a musty wool uniform spun her around, keeping a hand over her mouth.

His foreign tongue sounded to Maria as if he were gargling river pebbles in between words. In the artificial darkness the only thing she could make out was the gold hammer and sickle emblem on his cap.

Russians!

“What does it matter?” a second soldier jogged over from the closed door. He caressed the lapel of her dress before fondling her breast with his cupped hand. “She will more than meet our needs for entertainment. He loosened his belt buckle.

Wild-eyed, Maria gushed tears. The vice-like hand jammed her screams down her throat. Light interrupted the darkness.

“Stop! Stop this immediately!”

Maria still couldn't make out the words, but they resonated with authority and rescue.

“You sons of pigs, report to base.” A third man, an officer by the billed cap on his head, delivered a swift kick into the groin of one soldier, crumpling him in pain. The officer shoved the sole of his boot into the buttocks of the other sending him sprawling.

Embarrassed and overwrought, Maria collapsed onto the barn floor. Horse manure streaked one side of her face.

The officer inhaled a stifled breath. “I humbly apologize for my men's actions, miss.” The captain spoke understandable, if imperfect, German. He lent her his hand to get her on her feet. “Allow me to escort you home.”

The next day Maria overheard her mother and step-father, Karl, arguing in the kitchen.

“Why shouldn't she run some errands for us in the village?” Karl's voice oozed indignity. “Haven't I provided a roof over her head since she came back from Dresden? Is it my fault she didn't have the stomach for being a nurse? Is it my fault she was dismissed as a nannie after mere months? Can I help it that she's so feeble-minded?”

“You make it sound like she was an incompetent. Colonel Goslar explained that with his transfer to Berlin he was moving his family to his in-law’s home in Munich for their safety.”

Maria’s mother’s voice spat the words with the hiss of a spooked cat.

After an uneasy pause, her mother made her point with greater reserve. “I don’t want her walking into town unescorted, not after what happened yesterday.”

“I think you’re overreacting. Who knows what happened in the barn. She may have given them a look. They’ve been without for a long time and—”

“I will go.” Maria strode into the room. “What is it you need?”

The young woman’s presence left the older couple’s mouths speechless...for a moment.

Maria’s boldness buoyed Karl, and he jumped on his opportunity. “See, it’s not such a major undertaking for her. Your mother needs flour and coffee from the market. You can take my bicycle.”

“Karl, you must go with her.”

“No...it’s something I will do on my own.” Maria wasn’t doing Karl any favors. The short ride into the village represented a declaration of independence from this bastard.

The blue finish of Karl’s bicycle had faded into rust on most places except the center tube. Maria walked the bicycle into the barn. She took an old rag and lightly dabbed it into a fresh pile of Hugo’s manure. She wiped the cloth under each of her arm pits.

She pedaled with purpose the kilometer into the village.

With only a cursory glance at her identification papers, two Czech partisans in gray uniforms wrenched their noses and waved her through the checkpoint into the village.

Several Russian soldiers milled about the open air market. Their wolf-like grins ignored the vegetables and fruit. The older of the two looked at his comrade before staring at Maria. “My you are a lovely young lady. Would you show us the sights of your little berg?”

Maria hadn't a clue of the meaning of their barbaric tongue. It didn't matter.

“She smells of dung!” The seasoned soldier held his nose with one hand and flailed the scent off with the other.

The two stomped off to more appealing adventures.

Maria bought flour and coffee from an elderly women vendor. “Thank you, madam.”

“You're most welcome, young lady.” The woman's piercing blue eyes shone through a face of folds and crevasses. She pivoted her eyes sideways in each direction before adding, “The most expensive bottle of Chanel wouldn't serve you better than the perfume you've chosen for this day, my dear.”

Zeppel barked with abandon, announcing an intruder's presence just after dawn. Maria stirred out of bed and wrapped herself in a bath robe. As she met her mother to descend the stairs, someone pounded on the kitchen door.

“In the name of the Czechoslovakian army, everyone must come out!” An angry voice stewed in a fit of impatience punctuated by a ceaseless battering of the door.

Karl crept down the stairs in an undershirt and beltless trousers. He opened the door with the women behind him.

A balding Czech officer with a thin moustache glared, holding a Luger. “Anyone else?”

Maria, her mother and Karl shook their heads. They ventured a few steps onto the porch as Zeppel's herding instinct made itself a nuisance barking and weaving in between the partisans.

“Zeppel! Come here!” Maria tried to coax her dog. She edged a bit closer to the porch’s railing. In the cool morning air she grasped the robe close to her chest.

Maria counted a half dozen Czech soldiers in gray uniforms and caps standing in an arc within thirty feet of the porch entrance.

The officer motioned with the hand clutching the pistol, and half of his men entered the house to verify the civilians’ claim. From the clamor of overturned furniture and broken fixtures it seemed they sought more than people.

“In the name of the government of Czechoslovakia all ethnic Germans of this village are hereby ordered that they have thirty minutes to gather no more than ten kilos of possessions and proceed to the Richenberg border crossing.” The officer spoke with a zealous diction.

“What?” Karl interrupted. “We have done nothing”—

Without a whisker of his moustache moving, the officer offered Karl the back of his hand, sending Maria’s stepfather to his knees.

Maria felt little pity for Karl. His belief that the village was immune to Czech vengeance was a fool’s paradise. Credible accounts of Czech retribution in the form of rape and mass murder near Prague and points south existed for the past month. Absent the early hour of the intrusion, for Maria nothing about the soldiers’ visit surprised her.

One soldier left the house, nodding that all was claimed. Two others came out with an empty cigar box filled with jewelry and money. One of them approached Maria and grabbed her hand to remove her gold wedding band.

Maria wrenched backward. “No.” She used both hands to cover her ring, allowing her robe to open and reveal her undergarments.

The soldier cursed and raised his hand.

“Stop!” the officer ordered. With a nod of his head he commanded the soldier to retreat.

The officer’s eyes shifted from his men back to the three residents. “From Richenberg you will march into Germany.”

Agitated by the movement of the two soldiers coming off the porch, Zeppel’s renewed barking drowned out the last syllables of the officer’s mandate. The dog growled as the officer stepped away from his masters.

He turned back to the residents one last time. “You better hurry. You only have twenty-nine minutes.”

Zeppel feigned a lunge at the officer.

Without hesitation the Luger swung around and its sharp report almost obscured the fleeting yelp of the dog.

“Germany has enough dogs!” The officer proclaimed with a lilt to his voice before he took his troop down the road.

Maria started off the porch to the slain dog lying in its own pooling blood.

Her mother grabbed her by the arm, “Come, my precious daughter.” Tears welled in her eyes. “There’s nothing more we can do for him. We haven’t much time...besides, things have to be better for us across the border.”

Maria gathered an odd collection of a few garments, cheese cloth, a small tin and what little costume jewelry she still owned. Along with a few items of food she stuffed everything into a small upholstered travel bag. She stared at the band of gold caressing her finger. She had no control over her husband’s return. However, she could save the tangible symbol of their love the best she knew how.

Old bodies leaning against young legs stretched the four hour march to the border into ten. Maria looked back one last time upon the wooded crests and valleys where she grew up. Now three kilos of simple items in a fabric bag were the only echoes of her past life.

After sleeping in a school house on the outskirts of a small town, the exiles received Russian ration and travel cards. Local officials herded them outside where long tables held soup and bread for breakfast. After eating, Maria bid a tearful farewell to her mother who followed a relatively short road north to a sister in Zittau. Maria's heartache for Bruno sent her on a journey of several hundred kilometers to the west.

Before her tears evaporated, Maria's heart pumped an iron will throughout her body to overcome her homesickness. A light load allowed her to outpace most of the refugees on the macadam road to Harzburg. Soon she found herself at the front of it. She maneuvered next to a youthful, athletic-looking man and two nurses in white aprons and black caps clinging to the back of their heads.

"Oh...hello." Surprised by Maria's sudden appearance, one of two young nurses at the head of the line brushed some auburn hair out of her eyes. "I'm Traudl"—

"No last names, please," Maria interrupted. "The less we know about each other, the better it will be for all of us...just in case."

"She is right," the young man said. "My name is Fritz, and that's all you need to know."

"Hello, Fritz." Maria nodded her head.

"As I was saying, I'm Traudl, and this is my sister Anna." The woman pointed to a lanky blond with pig tails.

Maria smiled at Traudl and Anna who returned a nervous grin. Maria's low-heeled shoes clomped across the hard road surface. "How long will it take to get to Harzburg?"

"It will be a good five days' marching sun up to sun down...if we stay on the road." Fritz looked back. A good thirty meters already separated them from the rest of the group.

"If we stay on the road?" Anna nervously played with her pigtails.

Fritz peered ahead to the jutting pine-covered peaks on the horizon. "When we get to the mountains, I've learned there's a shortcut if you can handle walking over them. It would save us a day at least, perhaps two."

"We *will* be able to ride the trains once we get to Harzburg. Right?" Traudl kicked a stone in front of her.

"Supposedly the locomotive emblem on our travel card gives us that privilege." Fritz said. "Too many rails here in the east have been destroyed."

"Today we must lag behind the others." Fritz joined the nurses at a long table for a bowl of potato soup outside a school. A fog bank gave the appearance of dining in a cloud.

"Soup, soup, soup. Three days with nothing but soup and bread." Traudl complained just loud enough for her companions to hear.

"What I'd give for a piece of a torte." Anna held a spoon to her lips but her eyes glazed over.

Maria sat down with her travel bag and a steaming bowl. "Perhaps we should just be grateful to have enough food to get us to the west...into the hands of the English...or the Americans."

Fritz continued. "If my memory serves me correct, today we will take a trail into the mountains that intersects with the road we are on."

"That's what will save us a day's time...or more?" Maria wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Fritz nodded.

The sun frayed the fog blanket as the group left the school grounds.

Three bicycle riders rode through the throng, knocking several refugees down. "Mongrel Germans! Go back where you belong...you gypsies."

It wasn't the first negative encounter with locals since entering Germany. Maria wondered how residents of Bruno's hometown would treat her. She fantasized his capture by the British or the Americans. Like her path, all her hopes lay to the west.

Late morning the foursome made an inconspicuous exit from the rear of the tattered ribbon of wandering souls. They raced up an old logging trail until the coniferous forest shut the door behind them. Fog still clung to the matchstick pine trunks on the ridge. Pine needles swallowed the trail's surface except for the boulder-top knuckles planted along its way.

Three hours into the climb Fritz put up his hand and exhaled. "We can rest here."

Everyone found a rock or stump off the side of the path on which to sit.

"How much farther is it?" Anna rubbed her spindly legs.

The stillness of the clouded forest tingled Maria's spine as she bit into her last shriveled apple.

"I'm not sure," Fritz said, "other than once we clear the trees at the summit we'll have a grand view in all directions."

****A few moments later in mid-chew, Maria heard the deafening snap of a dried branch behind them. She turned and dropped what was left of her apple.

Russians!

Two soldiers with little more than peach fuzz on their sunken faces and submachine guns hanging from their shoulders haled the four in their crude tongue. “What do you have of value?”

The three women looked at each other—completely ignorant of the request and terrified of the possibilities.

Strange words in a coarse tongue stumbled out of Fritz’s mouth in reply. “We have nothing.”

One soldier offered a sly grin before grabbing Maria’s arm, the muzzle of his weapon pointing at her watch. “Jewelry? Watches?”

“Give us your valuables,” the second soldier spoke to Fritz. “We’ll give you your lives.”

“They want whatever jewelry or valuables you have,” Fritz relayed.

One soldier pointed his machine gun at the four, directing them a bit further off the trail. “Line up. Hold out your hands.”

He took Anna’s earrings and Maria’s watch. He demanded the rings on Traudl and Fritz’s fingers.

The other soldier looked through their spartan luggage and found nothing of interest until he opened Maria’s upholstered bag. Several pieces of costume jewelry fell out of the bag as well as a fist-sized tin and some pieces of clothing.

The Russian wasted no time in stuffing the cheap trinkets into his pockets before turning his attention to the tin box. He pried off the lid and recoiled.

A small mass wrapped in cheese cloth dropped into a bed of pine needles.

“Agh!” His lips contorted, exposing a set of misshapen teeth.

“Limburger cheese.” Maria pointed to the cloth with her foot.

“Go.” The soldier who robbed the others pointed his gun up the trail where rays of sunshine pierced the fog.

The four picked up their luggage and resumed their trek.

Maria expected a bullet in the back within seconds. Each step up the path was a burning fuse lit by fear. After a minute, she bolted into the mist.

With daylight stretched to its summer limits, they reached the summit by sunset. The group agreed that it was best to camp on the rock-strewn top for the night. They would start the descent into Harzburg in the morning.

Harzburg teamed with *English* soldiers. Of greater importance for Maria, its trains were running to the west.

Once at her destination, Maria walked the kilometer from the train station to her mother-in-law’s cramped third floor apartment. There she freshened up at the bathroom sink, her legs rubbing against the toilet.

In the postage stamp apartment there was little privacy for personal grooming beyond a closed door. She removed the lump of cheese from the tin and carefully pulled it apart. Her gold wedding band rested secure in the middle of the malodorous mound. She returned the cheese to the tin and washed her hands and the ring before placing it upon her finger.

“Maria?” Her mother-in-law curled her nose as her daughter-in-law sat down to coffee.
“Are you ill?”

Maria offered a contented grin and shook her head.