

A Drowning

by Sheila Luecht

Swirling in the pool she was diving and swooshing around trying to avoid the occasional mosquito that determined it was time for a quick bite. She had not wanted to be out here so late in the day, when the sun had moved so that the trees shaded the pool almost completely. It had been hard to drag herself outside today. Just a stupid thing, the pool right in the back yard, but still it was hard to bring herself into the water.

She did all the cleaning and fooling around with her writing and stuff in the house, until she could find no more excuses not to go outside and get in the pool. Usually this ritual only took a few hours, but today was Saturday and she had gotten up late. She had also woken her son and talked to him about the party he went to the night before.

Her time was spent in its usual way, breakfast, pills, organizing and cleaning. It was just hours behind today; hence the late swim. She was proud she did it, that she went outside. She swam, moved herself in the pool, chilly as it was. The pump made a wave so hard, that it was a challenge to swim directly into it. It was always a work out. Today she was distracted by some yellow finches flying around and the chortling of some birds up in the tree overhead.

Then she dunked herself again to avoid the dang buzzing mosquito flying around her face. She had finally given up on her sunglasses and baseball cap so she could dunk whenever she needed to. It was finally time to think about how this felt. In and out of the water, the swoosh, the water enveloping her; she was about to travel. She did not think of her near death experience almost drowning in a pool over 45 years ago. No, she imagined something quite odd and surprised herself with its unpleasantness, and yet it was not her memory.

Suddenly she found herself chained around the feet on a very cold day to four other people. Dressed in heavy winter clothes, the air strangely nipped at their faces and hands which were bound in front

of them with rope. It was a shocking moment, they were standing on the banks of the Danube river and about to be as insignificant as the snow which started to fall.

The soldiers were of the occupying force, German. They were assisted by their own Hungarian troops, members of the national socialist group Arrow Cross. Time was going quickly.

The next thing she heard were shots ringing out and felt a stinging in her thigh. She hit the water and the person to her left, whom she did not know, but was attached to, was sinking fast under the thin ice. She was struggling to loose her hands from the rope tying them together as she was being pulled down. She was not alone. The person to her left was her husband Jorge. She saw him sinking just above her, working on his rope, blood streaming into the cold water from his lower limbs, she could not determine from where. All she focused on was trying to somehow save herself, her husband. She did not stop to think of the other people, as the weight kept pulling her down.

This is what they counted on. The army had been rationing bullets. Other methods must be found they said to rid themselves of these stinking Jews. She was one of them, the stinking Jews. Hardly living her life as one, it had only been recently discovered by the oppressors. Her husband was not even a Jew, but he was caught in this with her and assumptions were always being made. He was actually not even Hungarian, but a refugee from Franco's Spain and someone who already had known the taste of the Nazi war machine.

An artist, he had wandered Europe in this difficult time, finally settling in Hungary and working for some wealthy patrons doing mural work in their numerous buildings and residences. They got caught up in the destruction rather late in the war. Hungary's Jews had been somewhat off limits. They had met and married along the way. He was attached to the family, he was their son in law, she was their only child, a daughter. Being Jewish did not seem to be a problem, up until that point. The Hungarians had loved their Jews it seemed and most of them never gave being a Jew a thought. It was

just something else to be, something exotic. Being a religious Jew was different.

Used to wealth and privilege, their wedding had been quite the affair. She wore ivory satin and jewels. The next day after the paper published their wedding picture, the gestapo arrived and picked up her husband. Confiscating her wedding jewels and those around her neck, she was left alone with the rest of her family. They had been preparing to depart for a honeymoon of sorts, when it all came tumbling down. The decrees had been read, poorer Jews were being round up. That had been two months ago.

After his initial interrogation her husband had been let go. Not being a Jew apparently was something of a bargaining chip. How her family was not picked up was due more to their money than anything else at that point.

Their good luck was not to last. As they had prepared to make an escape to unoccupied France, they were rounded up. The rest of the family was still at large, making their way to Switzerland. How this was managed, even she was unaware. She only had received a post card with a pre-determined code phrase. *Having a wonderful time baking quiche with Aunt Helga. Love, Helmut.* That was supposed to mean they were free. It was postmarked Switzerland. No one would know that was a kind of a joke in the family but the family. The card came to a general delivery address and was then smuggled to them in their hiding place, as they awaited their falsified travel documents.

It had been a joyous moment, and it almost seemed that this would be their fate too. But you can never count on luck. Luck alone is not always the answer to your problems. Without thinking they managed to get a little cocky. Her husband had been out trying to scrounge for some small things they would need on their trip. He was picked up in a raid. He had his own papers on him and the SS were familiar with him and the family into which he had married. No get out of jail free card this time. He was tortured and but gave no real information away and since he was not considered too

important, they left him for bigger fish. He was sitting in a brick prison just outside of the city limits.

An attempt was made to smuggle him out, and it only resulted in death for those who were part of the plan. He never made it out of his cell, the ruse having been discovered. So now he just waited; for what he did not know.

After some weeks, a month, then a few more days, he was still there. So now was his wife. She had been rounded up, her identity discovered. The orders were to transport these prisoners, along with a few others, to the bank of the Danube River at the park.

As she freed her hands, she found her husband had done the same. For a moment more, they were together, pulling each other closer, hugging, as the dead weight of two of the other bodies forced them down. The other person left alive was also struggling, trying to free their hands, but losing ground quickly, tiring and soon struggled no more.

In that very instant there was a huge light. It surrounded the two lovers and lit the dark water around their heads, they, pulling close, kissed each other. It was the last time to do so, so why not die in this way, instead of struggling for air, they both had somehow thought.

In that frigid water, in the dark place, a light had come and love had been the last thought. Soon however, the rest was truly surreal. They were being lifted up by hands of swimmers around them. A man with bolt cutters released their chained feet underwater. A woman with Olympic strength clutched the drowning young bride around the neck and forced a kick up to the surface. Breaking through very thin ice with a hard fist, they surfaced. Helped ashore and hidden in the park, they managed to help her survive the ordeal. Her husband rescued in a similar manner survived as well. Reunited again, not able to speak, they were carried off into hiding, together. It took some weeks of recuperation to be able to speak and they could barely remember much past the gun shots.

But she finally did remember the light. Her husband remembered it around her face as he thought almost simultaneously as she, to pull her tighter to him for a kiss.

There had not been any lantern or artificial light, the woman who had pulled her to safety said. She had been scouting the banks where the current was drifting with her group of secret rescuers, hoping for some sign, that someone had not been fatally shot and still lived. Those who were wounded might survive in the cold water as it might stop the bleeding, if they were quick. They were working in the immense darkness, all the street lights blacked out for air raids and no significant sources of lights nearby, their plan was to try and make some successful rescues without themselves being caught. They had been successful before.

No bright lights humanly made that night were seen, but a light was shining long enough for this group to be somehow spotted. In that immense blackness, terror, fear, a calming kiss of love was chosen and perhaps the light of the thought of it became the beacon.

If you do not believe this story, no one will blame you. There is no way to know that it ever happened. But the woman in the pool saw it all, and though decades later, how would she even know? She had traveled again.

