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You ask me how I came to the U.S. and got married.....

Faced with the dangers of World War II, I attempted to get out of Krakow, Poland, in an unusual way: My mother Mala made me write a letter to my friends Dr. and Mrs. Eder in N.Y. who had the good fortune to have taken a boat from Gdynia (on the Baltic Sea) in 1939 to be present at the New York Worlds Fair. Mrs. Eder had beautiful knitted dresses which were to be shown in the Polish Pavilion, and she therefore had planned a three-week trip to the U.S. Alas, Mr. Hitler had other ideas, and marched into Poland in September without being invited. Mr. and Mrs. Eder were stranded with many other people in the U.S., without permits to stay, and without much money... in total confusion.

As I understand it now, many Americans felt that it was not their problem and they should not mix in European squabbles... give a little, yes, to a few chosen individuals like writers, known scientists, etc., but for the rest - well!

Back to my letter. We felt the "occupying forces" quite literally, when my room of our beautiful apartment was "occupied" by the chief prosecutor of the conquered people in Poland. Soon another room was taken over by another high Nazi official.

In the letter my family composed to send to the Eders, we asked our friends to find an "honorable man" who would marry me to facilitate my exit from Poland and then release me from this arrangement once in the U.S.A. I never did get an answer to my letter and forgot all about it. Many years later I was to hear about the scene in New York when the letter was read to a group of the Eder's friends who laughed.... Who could imagine the enormous journey that I would take before I heard that side of the story, and would laugh together with those people, but for a different reason?!

In 1940 our family, along with many others, was evicted from Krakow to Wielicka ("Vyelitchka"), the famous salt mines where the black Madonna stands. My mother had left all our possessions, clothes, etc. with our neighbor there, a Christian woman with three daughters. We waited there for one year and a half, not knowing what they would do with us... all business people, owners, professionals, not of any "use" to the Germans. The working Jewish people were put into the Krakow Ghetto. They left the ghetto each day, worked all day in town, and returned to their cramped quarters at night. They had to wear the Star of David patch on their clothing, and somehow fell into routine life, as people get used to anything where there is no choice.

In autumn of 1942 we were to assemble in front of Wieliczka's Town Hall to be transported with what we could carry, to work in some distant place, no one knew where. and after many hours of standing in lines, we were transported by trucks to a waiting train. A miracle happened to me. A Polish policeman took me by the hand and put me next to the driver while the rest of the people, including my parents, were loaded on the open lorries and we took off in the middle of the night. All I can remember is that suddenly it was quiet. Everyone had been unloaded to waiting cattle trains and I was forgotten next to the Polish driver (not Jewish, of course). We drove in total silence, it seemed like forever, and suddenly we stopped at the edge of Krakow at 5 A.M., two hours before the nightly curfew would lift. I was told by the kind driver that I was "free to go".

There I was in fields at the outskirts of the city, dressed in a summer suit, with nothing else but my purse with a little money in it. I walked for about a mile, expecting at any moment to be shot for being outside during curfew without a special permit. I finally arrived, hungry, numbed like in a dream, or rather a nightmare, and was invited in to the home of my former piano teacher and friend, Mrs. Pozniak. My parents had once told me that some furcoats (necessary for the harsh Polish winter) and small personal items had been brought to Mrs. Pozniak's house, and whoever could escape should go there to find help and let the others know they survived. Zofia Pozniak was alone with her three small children. Her husband, a known musicologist was a prisoner of war somewhere in Germany. Yet she took me in and cared for me tenderly. I was in total shock, and didn't speak a word.

We'll skip several chapters of my odyssey in which I lived using false names and working as a translator in various offices, factories, hospitals, and Prisoner-of-war women's camp, because of my knowledge of Polish, German, English and French. As "Maria Zylinska" I had taken part in the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944, and was chosen to walk with a doctor from our Red Cross Hospital carrying a white flag to surrender officially. I was taken along with 2000 other women to the first camp that was for women prisoners-of-war. Since I spoke many languages which were necessary for communicating between camp officials and so many women from different places, I worked as a translator in the camp office. I was still at that camp in Oberlangen, near Holland, on April 12, 1945, the day President Roosevelt died, and the day we were liberated by combined Canadian and Polish forces (the nationalist Polish forces that had been in exile in London).

Another book or two later, by January 1946, I found myself at last on the Liberty Ship S.S. *Richardson* sailing to New York to stay with my aunt and uncle, Ruth and Arnold Licht in Forest Hills. This time I had a Belgian passport under my own name, Bronislawa Kohn, with a visa for the U.S. After three weeks on the stormy, angry Atlantic, we heard that there was a tugboat strike, and that the boat would have to dock at Philadelphia instead. As I watched from deck (which I never left during the whole trip!) I saw my aunt (the favorite sister of my mother) and uncle standing there in the wind, waiting for this survivor from what had been a very large extended family.

I was, as usual for me, the first one ready to get off the ship. There was a picture of me in the paper that day, a strange creature in American uniform (all the clothes I had, from my latest stint in American Intelligence in Frankfurt) descending the steps from the ship as I waved and smiled. They interviewed me and wrote some garbled version of my story, and told of my desire to become a dress designer. My aunt and uncle whisked me away to New York and my new life in the U.S. At Immigration my name was deemed too long, so they took my nickname, Bronika, and shortened that to "Nika".

I had lost the address of my friends the Eders, but by some stroke of luck, at my aunt's home I met a doctor who had just taken exams a few days before with other doctors who had to requalify to practice in America. He said there was a Dr. Eder at those exams. We contacted him by phone, and the Eders said "Is that really you?!" since they thought that I had not survived the war. The next day they gave a big party for everyone who had spent the war "stranded" in the U.S.A. They had formed a very close circle of friends who shared information and did what they could to help, give affidavits to those who could escape, and who gave each other support when they felt so helpless and lonely. These were some of the same people who had read my letter seven years before! One man at the party had just been informed that his wife and child had been killed in Poland. Like the Eders, Alfred Fleissig had come to the U.S. for the '39 World's Fair, but his role had been as representative of a Polish cable factory. He had spent the entire war trying to get his family out of Europe.

Five weeks later I was married to this kind and lovely man who, yes, had been present when my letter had arrived at Dr. Eder's asking to find me a husband by proxy! They had all laughed then at my naive idea, and now a wedding was to take place, but for real! We were married for 38 happy years until Alfred died in 1984. We had two wonderful children, a girl, Alicia, and a boy, Will. It all seems like a dream filled with danger and adventures and a guardian angel, perhaps my mother?, watching over me.