

Sonia Meyer

The Five Stages Life ... So Far

Years of War . . .

I was born in 1938 in Cologne, Germany, a crossbreed of several European ethnicities. My first memory is of my mother lifting me onto the kitchen table to put on my winter coat. It was the evening after fellow opponents of the Nazi regime, less vocal than my mother, had been strung up by a nearby railroad overpass and left dangling for all to see. That night we left everything we owned behind. I was not yet two years old, when we vanished into the hinterlands and forests of Germany, later occupied Poland to join other opponents of the 'master-race'.



My next memory – It is spring. I am standing on a hill. My father using a wooden mending egg, is teaching me how to toss a hand grenade. From then on messages were braided into my hair, which I carried from groups of women and children to their partisan men who, for the safety of their families, lived in forest hide-out camps apart. At age six I had turned into a 'runner'.

In between vague memories of forests changing with the seasons, abandoned barns and burned out buildings, always sleeping fully dressed, ready to get up and run, lying flat at the bottom of ditches or on the forest floor, waiting for shootings to subside or the after blast of bombs to pass us by. Often, my mother covered my eyes with a kerchief, when crossing the aftermath of those killer fields

A third memory is that of an old Gypsy woman, thin as a rail, she is holding my mother by both her hands. It was after the massacre by the railway tunnel. A group of women and children had been digging up left-over potatoes after harvest, when a pair of bomb-diving Stukas mowed them down. My mother and I were the only ones who made it to the safety of the tunnel. For days she couldn't stop shaking. She kept holding on to me. The old Gypsy woman, reading her face, said, "You need not worry, both of you will survive this war. And after your child will travel across many lands, but she will fly," she said her piercing eyes on me, "alone." I was used to seeing Gypsies in our hide-out world, what fascinated me was that some actually still had horses, which they left grazing free. None of us partisans had animals of any kind, they could have given us away.

Years of Peace.

Early one spring, the bombs stopped falling. It was my first moment of remembered ecstasy, what with the forest around me exploding back to life under an eerily empty deep blue sky. Only to witness the dreamed-about peace distort into a nightmare. For where it was us who stalked the enemy before, or retreated when sighted from a distance, the victorious Russian army now flushed us out into the open like wild boar from underbrush. It was no secret that many partisans were fervent anti-communists,

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who now were rounded up and machine-gunned down. Women were raped, their children killed. From a dug-out shelter we witnessed a young woman get tied to a cannon before it was fired off. Clearly the war was not something you could simply switch off overnight.

My father, bartering with whatever valuable we had left, procured for himself a bicycle. He left ahead of us. My mother and I joined the long slow march of those fleeing west. "Going home," she called it. For weeks we crossed scorched earth, demolished roads and railway tracks, across open land infested with typhus, devoid of food. We slept in open fields, in barns still standing. We rarely came across farm animals, once we awoke next to a horse, as emaciated as we were ourselves. Yet my mother told me that I, a child just short of seven, was cheerful during those weeks of walking, until we crossed the only bridge left across the river Rhine into Cologne, and found only her ancient cathedral left standing. Her twin towers threw long shadows across what had been bombed into Europe's largest field of rubble. And like rats scurrying across this dumpsite of war, an unending stream of returnees, refugees, prison inmates and the insane let loose, were seeking shelter in the dark damp basements of bombed-out buildings, desperately scavenging for food and unpolluted water.

Miraculously our apartment building in a suburb of Cologne, was almost intact, except the living space was now divided in two. In the other half, already installed, was a woman my father had met during the war. My parents' marriage started to splinter like dead wood. But what mattered most was the fight for food. Every afternoon my mother and I walked out into the country side, where in the late evening hours we stole fruit off the trees. She had rigged up a home-made still, and started making Schnapps as barter for bread and meat with the peasants, the only ones who were harboring left-over food.

Two years later my mother collapsed. She would never be the same again. I was smuggling on my own. Just before that winter I came across a Gypsy camp, next to a cemetery in walking distance from my house. I stopped to watch them cook their meals over open fires, the Gypsies looked at me, but let me be. Next time I hooked up with a gang of their boys, soon after we stole sacks of potatoes and coal off a freight train late at night. After which the Gypsy boys walked me home, carrying my booty sack across ruins where pedophiles, the insane, murderers, smugglers and war profiteers were roaming free. Dead raped children were found in ruins and bombed out houses on a daily basis. There was as yet no law and order, only the occupation troops patrolling the streets, but seeing us kids, looked the other way. I knew that within the midst of my Gypsy friends I was safe. Often before we said good-bye, I watched them share a smuggled cigarette, its tip glowing in the dark. We talked about the war, they were survivors of a Gypsy labor camp. I told them about the old Gypsy woman, and her prediction of me 'flying alone'. They laughed and told me that Gypsies don't read palms, they read faces, and that my face must have reminded the old *romni* of 'Radni vatsa', the wild goose of the Romani legend, the one who warns Gypsies of trouble ahead, yet always flies alone.

Some kind of order was slowly re-establishing itself. Former Nazi leaders were trickling back home from allied detention camps. Not only

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did everybody know who they were, ironically they left those detention camps much better fed than any of the rest of us. The Gypsies broke camp and moved on. By that time I had been going for a couple of years to a make-shift school with, the sons and daughter of a people in denial of the suffering they had caused. I must have known how to read and write before entering their school. I don't remember learning anything, but I know I kept skipping years. By age ten, German school authorities declared me mathematically gifted, and offering financial aid ordered my parents to switch me at once to a highly desirable High School, instead of the obligatory Grade School that lasted only till age fourteen.

I had just switched over when my father informed us, he was leaving us for good. The night he packed his suitcase remains branded in my memory with more detail than the war. My mother requested the state that due to her illness, she needed me to stay home, this request was denied, but assigned financial aid. For the next two years I was allowed to escape into learning. This changed drastically, when at age twelve, unlike the other girls in my class I was fully formed, and the headmistress ordered me to tie back my long reddish hair. Shortly after, she started locking me up in the map room for hours on end. This was, she said, "so as not to rile up the older boys when they arrive at noon." Ours was a gender-segregated school. Feeling for the first time in my life truly trapped for hours in a narrow map room by those I still considered my enemies, sometimes forgotten for hours on end, turned me into a live hand grenade ready to explode. I was running wild, getting into physical fights with my fellow students. I had survived the war, but feared I would not survive this peace.

Rescued by the Clan.

Entered some of those I had only heard about or rarely seen: my mother's siblings. Most striking among them my godmother, a dark-haired, black-eyed German-born Pilar, who had hidden many on the run in caves along the river Ahr. Her older brother, a landscape painter and giant with a hearing aid, who although drafted into the German army, had rushed to save a French mother and child from a Stuka attack, and was hidden after by the French for the duration of the war. A second brother, who upon entering Russia had defected and made it back by walking solely in the dark of night. The eldest sister, a painter and writer, married to an Italian Jew, who had fled Italy for the United States. Back by then in Italy, she had sent her eldest son. He spoke no German. He actually had his own car.

The clan was clearly dominated by someone who died long before the war. My mother's father. His photograph showed a slender, dark skinned man, known for his talent as a stand-up comedian and circus performer with horses. In life he had blown in and out of their lives with the unpredictability of a storm. His outlook on life had been simple, -it was that known motto for Gypsies, travelers and vagabonds - 'the dog that travels will find the bone'. And most of his children, turned painters and writers, spread out across Europe and the U.S. Eccentric and original in both their lives and their art, four of the seven had succeeded by marrying rich. So now my mother was taken under my godmother's wing, whereas I, with the help of my cousin, was hauled off to the one who had found the biggest bone of all, the aunt in Italy.

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Overnight I landed in a world of wealth, servants, a chauffeur and multiple homes. Surrounded by artists and famous scientists, I listened to conversations that had switched from mere survival to quality in the arts and the making of atom bombs. My life now spread out from Italy to major and minor cities in Europe, mostly those in possession of museums containing the greatest art. And last but not least, the United States because of her excellent institutions of higher learning. Again my hair was an issue. My aunt simply had it cropped short, like the actress Audrey Hepburn, then much in fashion both in Europe and abroad. I was furthermore subjected to a crash course in comportment and the art of good taste, most of all to eat as if I had never known hunger before. In other words, given my own penniless circumstances, I was being groomed to marry rich.

The pick candidate was a runty man with money and a title. There I was, as far removed from anything Gypsy as the earth is from the sky, yet it was one of their sayings that kept reverberating through my mind: Money in hand, bride on horse. Not this bride. I age sixteen I returned to my mother, where almost immediately I was courted by a young French man, with whom I made a deal. I would marry him on paper under condition that at age twenty-one he would let me go free. Without a moment's hesitation he took me away from the ambitions of my family and the misery of my past. We had a combined age of forty, when we set off for Europe's High North. Finland. My journey had begun.

Life of a Modern-Day Nomad.

My life turned into a long chain of un-foreseens. My marriage of escape turned into a marriage of love, but an inner restlessness would not allow me to settle down. So, as agreed upon, at twenty-one I divorced and my wild zigzagging around the world began: from Northern Europe through France, Spain and Portugal, where I took a boat back to the States. What emerged almost at once was my inner core. I started to write. It had been writing all along. Just as I had watched my aunts and uncles test and mix their paint, so I had played around with words, sentences, setting life into words. At once I broke truly free. In the early morning hours I woke to a desire to sit down and write, pouring out my inner most feelings. The world around me started to grow clear, my written word explained myself to me, it healed the past. My writing was there at my side wherever I went. I felt not only free, but self-contained.

At once opportunities, friends, love, but most of all luck blew my way. My freedom of course came at the cost of having to support myself. I started out working as a model for high fashion and photography. When a marriage proposal briefly derailed me back in Europe, I switched to making my living with my brain and skills I had picked up along the way. The eight languages I had acquired by then, offered work in a variety of projects within embassies and large corporations. I chose projects of less than a year, avoiding nine-to-fives except for times of immediate money needs. For months in between I hopped into my car, and drove to where the mood or invitations by wealthy friends would take me. St. Moritz, Paris, Megeve, Rome, the Cote d'Azur. It was while traveling through France that I happened upon traveling Gypsies and their caravans. I'd always stop and wave at them, especially they were parked in some mead-

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ow next to a brook for the night, their horses grazing free. But looking at me, dressed in the latest fashion, driving a sporty car, they'd look the other way. Unperturbed I'd approach one of their horses instead, gently whispering words in Romani. It never failed to break the ice, one or more Gypsies from among them would strike up a lively inquiry, of where what when and how, in French and my few words of Romani.

A child, for the first time in my life, I kept skipping along this mostly carefree life, until, on my way to meeting friends in Switzerland, I drove through a snowstorm and my car skidded off the road. I was stuck in Geneva, waiting for insurance money to reimburse me. Geneva in The Sixties was bustling with people from all over the world. I decided to look for work and spend some time. I walked into the offices of an American Philanthropic Organization enquiring about work. What I encountered for the first time was a group of true idealists united in their fight against racism and their work with Jewish refugees. I started out as a translator/assistant to one of their social workers. It became a work of passion. For the first time I had the opportunity to work with documents describing the highly organized persecution and genocide of the Jewish people. It brought home to me the full tragedy of the war I had survived. I realized the immense luck of never having been caught. What struck me though, was that there was little or no mention of the parallel fate of the Roma people, the close to two million Gypsies who had been brutally murdered, and seemingly forgotten.

I worked long days, but nights I still reverted to my newly acquired frivolous self. It was The Sixties, Geneva was a hub for the jet-setting rich and famous. In private clubs members of European deposed royalty, handsome rabbis and international socialites, Arabs and Israelis, rising tycoons, diplomats, danced through the night. An elite world dotted with spies like raisins in a cake. But the carefree part of my life was coming to an end. I formed a deep friendship with a brilliant American blue blood. Addicted to uppers, downers, alcohol and despair, in her schizophrenic mind she seemed to experience all the atrocities of a war she had not lived. One night I saved her life by rushing her to a hospital after an attempted suicide. First thing she did after she came out of a coma three days later was to repudiate me for not letting her die. But by then she had drawn me deeply into what seemed the dark side of me. Another offer of marriage popped up, this time from a rising tycoon. For the first time that offer contained a hook, out of the public eye, the man was generously contributing to refugees, my social worker friends were urging me to accept.

Confused, I needed time out, to re-assess. With lots of connections at my disposal on account of my work, I moved to Israel, diving into all aspects of that still new-born nation, vibrant and full of hope. I spent time with Bedouins in the Negev still roaming free. For the first time I came across nomads that suppressed their women. Gypsies would never survive that way. By the time I returned to Geneva, I decided once again that marriage was not for me, but I was eager to reconnect with my friend. We talked and decided to meet the next day. That night my best friend killed herself. The police told me they found her surrounded by photographs of atrocities in Vietnam. Geneva's jet-setting crowd, of which she had been a belligerent part, kept on partying around the clock. Nobody seemed to care. It was a turning point in my life. I realized I could not emotionally

survive if I remained alone.

Time to Settle Down.

I turned my back to life in Europe, and decided to return to the States, to stay this time. Once there my writing intensified. I started a novel, writing in English this time. To get by and get excess to Harvard libraries for research, I took a summer job at that University. During the last days of that job, I met a man, he had a child. It was an unlikely match, but something deep within connected us, that I could not leave behind. I came to realize I loved them both. I overcame my greatest fear of all, although it took three licenses, two expired, we got married on the third. For the first time in my life I felt the calm that comes with happiness settle in. The wild goose of the Romani legend had found her mate. Next came our nest, a pretty house in Cambridge, followed by a cat and a dog, and shortly after by the oldest and most exhilarating miracle of all – our first child, followed immediately by another. While sitting in my cozy house, peacefully nursing my babies, I watched the snow fall onto a porch outside, or spring explode in our fenced-in city garden that seemed to enclose this new world of mine. Writing took a back seat now, but I returned to my love of learning, so close at hand. Meanwhile, the normally peaceful academic town is breaking out into upheaval, protesting students were marching against the war in Vietnam. During lock-up at a Harvard Yard I found myself barred from the exit along with groups of screaming students. I tried in vain to convince a big Irish cop by the big iron gate, that he was keeping me from breast feeding my baby, and to let me out.

In fact breast-feeding was another issue under scrutiny in those Cambridge days. Intellectual women of my new circle of new friends and neighbors were on the march to self-fulfill, scarcely into breeding, let alone the feeding by breast. As to myself, I was hooked on creating new life. In fact I needed more space. We bought a beautiful house with land in open valley of Vermont. I started breeding Golden Retrievers, dogs that go well with children. And cats, they needed no encouragement. Then looking at the lush forest that surrounded us and all that open land, I decided what it needed was horses. The first horse was for me, I started riding with a friend who is an Olympic rider of dressage. Together we bought a stallion, the breeding started in earnest now. Soon there were twenty plus horses peacefully grazing but unlike the Gypsy ponies, they were fenced. And then of course there were my children, happily racing through the open valley on ponies of their own. Soon I was on the road, traveling with horses in a shiny van, showing and selling.

In a happy marriage time has a way of flying by, my children started leaving, first to boarding school and on to college. The nest was empty. The time had come to concentrate on writing. My mind turned back to those with whom I had always felt at home - my friends the Gypsies. Their mistrust of the written word, had not only kept their own culture clean of unwanted infiltration, but a secret to outsiders. When I started out, over fifteen years ago, there was little material available in universities or major libraries. However in the stacks of Harvard's Widener Library I discovered a translation of a novel by a Russian Gypsy, by the name of Matteo Maximoff, about Russian nomadic Gypsies. It was self-published and listed his telephone number in back. I called him, we hit it off. I went to Paris where

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he lived, and we became close friends.

After that, I slipped back into the lives of Gypsies as easily as a hand into a well worn glove. Before long I traveled to Macedonia, where I was received by a so-called Queen of the Gypsies, and lived with a family in the Gypsy section of Skopje, where some Gypsies were very well off. I crossed the border into Kosovo, where I huddled with them in their beleaguered shanty villages fearing for their lives. When asked what I do, I told them "I am dealer of horses". With nostalgic smiles, they had been forcibly settled for many generations, they told me, "that is the noblest profession of all, a dealer of horses." On to Budapest, where I sat down with educated Roma activists discussing how we could further the fight for their people's human rights. I was welcomed into a deeply religious American tribe.

I often wondered what makes me long for them, when they are not nearby. So before my mother died, I asked, "That grandfather of mine, the dark and skinny one, was he in reality a Gypsy?" She looked at me with her stark eyes, their darkness faded, "I was not born under a wagon," she whispered. "So I decided long ago to declare myself a Rhinelander. Besides," she softly added, "as you by now should know, reality is like a rubber band. You can stretch it any way you desire."