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LYDIA

The Autobiography of Lydia Orem
as told to

Rosa Guy

Lydia is a tale of "Evangelinian" quality, simply told, of a young Hungarian girl uprooted from her home by World War II; of the brutal and tragic experiences that befell her during her two-and-a-half-year walk from Hungary to American-occupied Germany, fleeing before the advance of the Russian armies; of her tender love for a Black GI in Germany from whom she is separated after the birth of two children; of her relentless ten-year search for her lover, and of finally being reunited with him in America's jim-crow South.

OUTLINE
of the PROPOSED autobiography
LYDIA

"I opened my eyes and there was this soldier looking down at me. He was black. I was scared. So many things had happened since the day of that year when I walked out of my home to go to school. What more could happen to me? Yet I was so scared. I had never seen anybody black before. There was this girl with him. She was German. She tried to talk to me. I made her understand that I was Hungarian. Then the soldier went out and came back with still another black soldier. This one could speak a little Hungarian. 'My name is Harry,' he said. 'What's yours?' 'Selva,' I told him. 'Sylvia,' he said. 'Selva,' I repeated. 'O.K., we'll call you Sylvia from now on.'

"He went out and I kept looking at the door of the box car. What now? I kept asking myself. He came back with food. I snatched it out of his hand and began to eat. I was so hungry. He was sorry for me. Oh, he was so kind and good to me. His eyes were so brown and so sad. For the first time since I left home I was not afraid."

Thus, begins the saga of Lydia Selva, middle-class, Catholic, Hungarian girl, caught in the changing fortunes of World War II, as leaving her bombed out school in Buda--with her friend,

Nucko--she searched for a crossing point over the Danube ~~R~~ River, to get back to her home in Pest, and became instead victim to the mindless chaos caused by the break-down of social order which accompanies war.

Captured, first by Germans, then later by the advancing Russians, forced to work; was beaten; raped; Lydia's compassion for her frailer friend, Nucko, gave her the courage and strength to dare the impossible: "I had always wanted a sister and I told her, '...don't be afraid, Nucko. I'll protect you...'" and when she saw her friend succumbing to the brutality: "'...this is not for us, Nucko. We got to get out of here."

Managing to escape the Russians, the two girls walked through fields and forests for weeks--months--eating only the berries from trees, wheat from the fields, sleeping curled together for warmth at the trunk of trees. Finally they came upon a little town where "...bodies of people and animals... cows, dogs, chickens...all over the streets...there was not one living soul in the whole town...and so we searched for corpses our size so we could get clothes to wear--especially boots because our shoes had worn off our feet and we had to wrap them in leaves. Then Nucko said: "I feel so funny. Like if I'm a corpse." And I told her, 'don't worry they can't hurt you...'"

A few days later they came to a river: "...I knew it was the Danube. There is no water so blue in the whole world." Finding a spot narrow enough to swim across they soon realized that they were in another country: "...I called out to this woman as she looked at me so strange...I asked her, 'Are you Hungarian?' She answered in a language I couldn't understand ...and then I knew we were a long way from home. I had lost my family..."

But the worst was yet to come: "...Sirens kept blowing and people kept running all around us. We began to run along with them...we came to a house where a man was directing people into a basement. We ran up to him and he pushed us along with the rest. I felt safe...then the door closed... It was so dark and I was so afraid. I reached for Nucko, but they had pushed her away from me....'Nucko, Nucko,' I called out but she did not answer...there were so many people packed in there...I opened the door and ran out of the basement. Bombs were falling all around me. I ran across the street and dived under a porch and buried my head in my arms. Bombs exploded. One seemed to explode right over my head.... "

Then it was silent. Leaving her refuge under the porch Lydia looked across to the barn. It was no longer there. "I listened for voices but I didn't hear any....I grabbed

the arm of a passing man and tried to make him understand that there were people buried. "Then he understood and began to search until he found an opening into the basement...then I went down...but everybody was sealed together by the force of the bomb...'Nucko! Nucko!' I called but she did not answer...and then for the first time since I left home I sat down and cried and cried..."

Alone now, Lydia's trek continued through fields and forests, which an eternity later brought her to some railroad tracks where trains packed with people--of all nationalities--and soldiers, were continually passing. "...they were not Hungarian soldiers. They were not German soldiers and they were not Russian soldiers. I knew because of the color of their uniforms..." They were, in fact, American soldiers. And the people on the trains were refugees who had been rounded up and were on their way to American camps.

Then one of the trains stopped. People started getting off. Lydia, living for so long as an animal, scurried to find a hiding place. "...and then this woman's voice said: 'Stop!' In Hungarian. I began to run toward the voice..." The woman told Lydia that she would never find her way back home from there and convinced her to come along to the camp--where at least she could eat.

But Lydia found the camp too oppressive and ran away. She began walking once again and hitching rides until she arrived, - ragged, tired and hungry, - at Munich, where she was found in the box-car by the black American G.I. but more specifically by Harry Orem, with whom she fell in love. "...I knew deep in my heart the good God had sent Harry to me because I had gone through a lot of hard times...."

II

Their love affair was slow in starting but it was inevitable. Then for two happy years Harry and Lydia were together, with Lydia following Harry's Quartermaster battalion from city to city. They had one son, Harry Jr and when he was one and a half years, a second son, Riley was born in the city of Giesen. Riley was three weeks old when Harry, was sent on a secret mission from which he never returned. After waiting for months, without word, Lydia decided to go to the American base in Nurenberg to find out for herself what had become of Harry. Upon arriving in Nurenberg, Lydia was picked up by the police - and despite her tearful protests, - was put in the hospital for VD examination with their round-up of prostitutes. This delay caused her to arrive at the base the day after Harry had been sent back to the States. "...what was I going to do without Harry. I was so unhappy. I loved him from the

bottom of my heart. I knew that when he could he would send for me and his children." But now her problem was to find a way to care for her children and herself.

Leaving her children in Geisen, with the landlady, she went to Nuenberg where she got a job working ~~for~~ a trucking company. While working she sent all of her money--except the barest minimum she needed--for the care of the children. But the job only lasted over a year. German soldiers returning home from prison camps were replacing women on jobs and Lydia was laid off.

When Lydia went back to Geisen she found that her landlady had been keeping the money for herself and had put her children in an orphanage. She went to see them but not having a place for them to stay she asked the matron, of the orphanage, to keep them until she could find a job and a place for them.

After weeks looking and not finding a job, Lydia went to a priest and begged his help in sending her children to the States. The priest agreed to help her. Lydia went back to the orphanage for the children but the woman told her: "'...your children are no longer here.' I asked her, 'Where are my children? What did you do with them?'" The woman ordered her to leave. Lydia refused. Someone hearing them quarrel called the police who came, took Lydia, put her in jail and there she remained for sixteen months.

And all the while in jail: "...I could only think, where are my children? What would Harry say when he knew I didn't have them any more." But more upsetting, Harry didn't know where she was. Suppose he would send for them and there was no one to tell him?

When Lydia, was released all she had were her clothes on her back. She had no place to go, no money, no one to help her. After wandering about the city for days, one day a Black GI came up to her. "'where are you going,' he asked me. I told him no place. I didn't want to tell him my troubles. 'If you're not going any place^e why don't you come with me,' he told me. 'Where are you going?' 'To get something to eat.' So I went with him." And although she did not want to tell her troubles, after she had eaten, she found herself telling him about her children.

The soldier, Arden Darity, promised to help her. He rented a room for her in the home of an elderly couple where he could visit her. She did not want to be with him: "...I prayed to God to forgive me for being with this man that I did not love. I would never love any other man except the father of my children."

But Arden was good to her. He made inquiries and soon found the woman who had her children. But when Lydia went, she found only her eldest son. "!.where is my baby?' I asked

the woman. 'You only have one son,' she told me. 'I know more than you how many sons I have,' I told her." The woman threatened her with the police, and Lydia, afraid that she would be jailed again, left with Harry Jr.

Arden, also introduced her to the American chaplain who tried to help her find Riley. But he had no more success than she. Everywhere he asked he was told that Lydia had only one son. Lydia asked his help in trying to locate Harry in the States. Harry could prove that they had two sons. The chaplain put her in touch with the red cross who wrote to Harry in the States. The answer they received was from Harry's mother who explained that Harry had been working as a truck driver since he had been back in the States but had recently been in a serious accident and was in the hospital. She also wrote that Harry wanted his children but he did not want anything more to do with Lydia, because he was engaged to be married.

"....right there in the red cross center I began to scream and cry. I told them that it was a lie. 'My Harry only loves me and his children. He don't love nobody else.'"

Lydia was desperate to get to the States. All she had to do was to see Harry and everything would be all right. They would be together and he would find Riley. But how to get to America? She had no job. no money. All she had was Arden's kindness. Then Arden asked her to marry him.

she had asked to tutor her son in English had been seen entering her home. But this needless cruelty of Arden's worked in her favor:

The lawyer who secured her release became her friend and adviser. She had already been in the States for a few years and he told her she was entitled to apply for citizenship. He offered to help her. Lydia, then found an apartment, away from Arden, and a job in a plastic factory where she could save money under a withholding plan. She began to pay the lawyer for his services which included the start of divorce proceedings.

All during this time she had not written to Harry, afraid that she might be deported, for she knew that Harry would ~~na~~ come to her if he knew that she was in the States. She did not write now afraid to expose her hand. But while she was waiting for her divorce to come through she devoted all her time to her son: "I loved him just like my father and mother loved me. I used to take his father's picture and sho^w it to him. 'You see, this is your father and he loves you very much...and little Harry would say to me, 'When are we going to see my father?' And I would say, 'patience.' Then he would ask me, 'What about my little brother?' And I told him...'"wait, when it is time we'll all be together again.'"

Then there was the day that Arden Darity forced himself

Lydia was wild with joy but she was also conscience-stricken. Going to her friend ^{the} Chaplain she told him: "Arden Darity asked me to marry him. He knows I don't love him. If I do marry him and go to America I will be going to find the father of my children. Will God forgive me for doing such a thing?" The Chaplain reassured her: "As long as you do not lie to him God will forgive you." And so Lydia married Arden.

III

But if Lydia thought it would be easy to find Harry, in the States, she was mistaken: 1. America was a vast place. No one, in Boston, where she lived seemed to have heard of a place called Federick, in Maryland. 2. Her husband, who was a professional soldier stationed outside of Boston, became suspicious and jealous once he had settled his white wife in a black community: He used her ignorance of the language and customs of her new country as a sword over her head; threatened her with deportation; forced her to sign her government allotment checks over to him, to keep her completely dependent on him; and made his soldier friends spy and report all her activities back to him.

Intimidated, Lydia was a docile, if unhappy wife, all during her first few years in the States. And she would have remained so if Arden, had not--on the report of a friend--put her in jail on a charge of adultery: A young man, whom ~~h~~/

into her home threatening her with deportation and she was able to say to him, "....there is nothing you can do to me. I became a citizen of the United States yesterday."

On the day that her divorce papers came through, she went and took her son out of school . "....we are going to see your father today...."

Lydia only knew that Harry lived in Federick, Maryland. And she sent a telegram to Harry Orem, Federick Maryland. "I told him that your son and I are getting on a bus in Boston and we will be in Federick today..."

They did not get there until the next morning and no one was waiting for them. She waited until the station had cleared before going to a taxi stand and asking the taxi driver: "....do you know Harry Orem?" 'Sure do,' the man answered. 'known him a long time. He's a fine man.' 'Can you take me to him? This is his son.' 'Sure can.'

Lydia had not seen Harry in ten years. Her sons had been almost two and three weeks in 1950. It was 1960. Yet she had no fear that he was not waiting. Her faith had carried her through the years. She knew it was impossible that Harry would have married. He loved her and his children.

As the taxi weaved its way through the beautiful town of Federick and into its ~~slum~~ section, it never occurred to Lydia that another trial was about to begin in her life--the trial of a white woman married to a Black man in Dixie. Nor

would it have mattered if it had. Whatever lay ahead she had no doubt that she would face it at the side of Harry Orem. And it was this belief that broadened the smile on her face as the taxi drew up before the ramshackled little house and Harry came running down the steps to scoop them up in his outstretched arms. Her years of searching and waiting were at an end. They were together again and together they would find their long missing son, Riley.