To my beloved wife, Elisabeth, who visited Auschwitz with me and fell in love with this story. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

—

To the more than twenty thousand ethnic Gypsies who were imprisoned and exterminated in Auschwitz and to the quarter million murdered in the forests and ditches of northern Europe and Russia.

—

To the Asociación de la Memoria del Genocidio Gitano (Association for Remembering the Gypsy Genocide), for their fight for truth and justice.

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The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death.

—Elie Wiesel

An hour after leaving Kraków our convoy stopped at a large station. The sign gave the name of the place: Auschwitz. That doesn't mean anything to us. We'd never heard of the place.

—Miklós Nyiszli

One required an extraordinary moral force to teeter on the brink of the Nazi infamy and not plunge into the pit. Yet I saw many internees cling to their human dignity to the very end. The Nazis succeeded in degrading them physically, but they could not debase them morally.

—Olga Lengyel

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Auschwitz Lullaby has been the hardest book of my entire professional career to write—but not because of any formal difficulties with the writing or quandaries about where the story was headed. What worried me was not being able to capture the greatness of Helene Hannemann's soul within the lines of these pages.

Human beings are momentary breaths in the midst of the hurricane of our circumstances, but the story of Helene reminds us that we can be the masters of our own destiny, even though the entire world is literally against us. I cannot say if this book has taught me to be a better person, but certainly to offer fewer excuses for my errors and weaknesses.

When Larry Downs, my friend and publisher, heard Helene's story, he said the world needed to know it. But that does not depend on us . . . It's up to you, dear reader, and

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your love for truth and justice. Help me to tell the world the story of Helene Hannemann and her five children.

Madrid, March 7, 2015
(just over seventy years after
the liberation of Auschwitz)

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PROLOGUE

March 1956
Buenos Aires

I held my breath during the airplane's steep ascent. I'd hardly even stepped outside the capital city the entire six years I've spent in Argentina. The thought of being cooped up in such a small space for so many hours made my chest hurt, but as the plane's nose evened out, so did my breathing, and I calmed down.

When the attractive blonde came up and asked if I wanted anything to drink, I told her tea would be fine. For a second I thought about having something stronger, for my nerves, but since my stay in Auschwitz, I had snubbed alcoholic beverages. It was a disgrace to see my colleagues drunk day in and day out, and Commandant Rudolf Höss barely batting an eye. It was

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true that in those final months of the war, desperation had overtaken many men. Some had lost their wives and children in the barbaric Allied air raids. Still, a German soldier—and even more so a member of the SS—should remain collected regardless of the circumstances.

The stewardess carefully placed my hot tea on the tray table, and I flashed her a smile. She had perfect features. Her lips were just wide enough, her eyes a bright, intense blue, her cheeks small and rosy—the ideal Aryan face. Then I turned my eyes to my old black leather case. I had packed a couple of biology and genetics texts to make the trip go faster. I cannot explain why, but at the last minute I also decided to grab a couple of the old notebooks from the *Zigeunerlager* kindergarten in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Years before I had put them with my reports on genetic studies carried out in Auschwitz, but I had never gone back to read through them. The notebooks were the diaries of a German woman I met in Auschwitz, Helene Hannemann. Frau Hannemann and her family, and the war, were now part of a distant past I preferred not to dwell in, the years when I was a young SS officer and everyone knew me as Herr Doktor Mengele.

I reached over and picked up the first notebook. The cover was completely faded, the corners were stained with dried splotches, and the paper had taken on that

faded yellow color of old stories no one cares about anymore. Swallowing my first sip of tea, I slowly opened to the first page. The long, slanting hand of Helene Hannemann, the director of the Gypsy nursery school at Auschwitz, took me back to Birkenau, to section BIIe, where the Roma were housed. Mud, electric fences, and the sweet smell of death—that was Auschwitz for us, what it remained in our memories.

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ONE

May 1943
Berlin

It was still dark when I stumbled half-asleep out of bed. Though it was starting to get warm during the day, the mornings continued to be chilly enough to give me goose bumps. I slipped into my light satin robe and, without waking Johann, headed for the bathroom. Fortunately, our apartment still had hot water, and I could take a quick shower before going to wake the children. All of them but little Adalia had school that morning. I wiped the steam off the mirror with my hand and looked at myself for a few seconds, noting how the encroaching wrinkles seemed to make my blue eyes look smaller. I had bags under my eyes, but that was not surprising for a mother with five children under the age of twelve and who worked double shifts

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nursing to keep the family afloat. I toweled off my hair 'til it recovered its straw-blonde color, but I stopped to examine the gray streaks that were spreading upward from my temples. I got to work curling my hair, but that only lasted until I heard the twins, Emily and Ernest, calling me. I threw my clothes on and, still barefoot, hurried to the other bedroom.

They were sitting up in bed chatting quietly when I entered the room. Their two older brothers remained curled up, grasping at the last few seconds of sleep. Adalia still slept with us, as the kids' bed was too small for all five of them to squeeze in.

"Less noise, sweeties. The others are still sleeping. I have to get breakfast ready," I whispered. They beamed at me as if the simple sight of my face were enough to make their day.

I pulled their clothes off the chair and placed them on the bed. The twins were already six years old and did not need my help getting dressed. The more people there are in a family, the more streamlined the systems have to be to help everyone get the simple tasks done as quickly and easily as possible.

I went into our tiny kitchen and started heating things up. A few minutes later, the bitter scent of cheap coffee filled the room. That weak substitute of brown-tinted water was

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the only way to cover the tastelessness of our watered-down milk, though by now the older kids knew they were not drinking real milk. Every now and then with a bit of luck, we could get our hands on a few cans of powdered milk, but since the beginning of the year, rations had grown even scarcer as things got worse on the front.

The children came racing to the kitchen, elbowing their way through the narrow hallway. They knew the bit of bread with butter and sugar that they were offered every morning would not linger long on the table.

"Less noise, please, loves. Your father and Adalia are still in bed," I scolded as they took their seats. Despite their hunger, they did not tear into the bread until I had handed around the mugs and we had prayed a short prayer of thanks for our food.

Three seconds later the bread had disappeared and the children were downing their coffee before heading to the bathroom to brush their teeth. I took that moment to go to our room, get my shoes and coat, and put on my nurse's hat. I knew that Johann was awake, but he always played possum until he heard the front door close. He was ashamed that I was the family's breadwinner now, but everything had changed in Germany since the war began.

Johann was a violin virtuoso. He had played for years in the Berlin Philharmonic, but since 1936, the restrictions

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against everyone who did not fit into the Nazi Party's racial laws had grown much harsher. My husband was Romani, though most Germans used words like *Gypsy* or *tzigane* to describe people of his race. In April and May of 1940, practically his entire family had been deported to Poland. We had not heard anything from them in nearly three years. Fortunately, in the Nazis' eyes I was a purebred; because of that, they had not bothered us since then. Even so, every time someone knocked on our door or the phone rang at night, my heart jumped involuntarily.

When I got to the front door, the four older children were waiting with their coats buttoned, their school caps on, and their brown leather satchels at their feet. I looked them over, tied on their scarves, and dawdled at the part of the routine when I kissed their cheeks. Blaz, the oldest, sometimes pushed my effusive affection away, but Otis and the twins ate up those precious moments before we crossed the threshold to walk to school.

"Come on, I don't want you to be late. I've only got twenty minutes 'til my shift starts," I said, opening the door.

We had hardly made it onto the landing and flipped on the light when we heard the clop of boots noisily ascending the wooden stairs. A chill ran up my spine. I swallowed hard and tried to smile at the children, who had turned to look at me, sensing my unease. I gave a nonchalant wave

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of the hand to reassure them, and we started to go down. The children dared not leave my side. Typically I had to keep them from dashing headlong down the stairs, but the approaching footsteps quelled their energy. They crept along behind me, as if my lightweight green jacket might conceal and protect them.

By the time we got to the second-floor landing, the sound of the boots filled up the entire stairwell. Blaz leaned over the rail to get a look and one second later turned back to give me the look that only an older brother can give to communicate what he knows without upsetting the younger ones.

My heart starting racing then. I could not breathe, but I kept going down the stairs hoping that once again misfortune would simply pass me by. I did not want to believe that suffering had chosen me that time.

The policemen ran into us right in the middle of the second flight of stairs. The agents were young, dressed in dark-green uniforms with leather belts and gold buttons. They stopped directly in front of us. For a silent moment my children looked in awe at their pointed helmets with the golden eagle, but then they dropped their eyes to the level of their shiny boots. A sergeant stepped forward, panting a bit, looked us over, and then began to speak. His long Prussian-style mustache shook with his politely threatening words.

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"Frau Hannemann, I'm afraid you'll need to return to your apartment with us."

I looked straight into his eyes before answering. The cold reply of his green pupils pierced me with fear, but I tried to remain calm and smile.

"Sergeant, I'm afraid I don't understand what's going on. I need to take my children to school and then get to work. Is anything the matter?"

"Frau Hannemann, I would prefer that we speak in your apartment," he answered, forcefully taking my arm.

His movement startled the children, though he had intended to be subtle. For years we had witnessed the violence and aggression of the Nazis, but this was the first time I felt actually threatened personally. I had hoped for so long they would simply fail to notice us. The best way to survive in the new Germany was to be invisible.

The door of some neighbors, the Wegeners, opened ever so slightly, and through the crack I glimpsed a pale, wrinkle-creased face. She gave me an anguished look, then opened the door all the way.

"Herr *Polizei*, my neighbor Frau Hannemann is a wonderful wife and mother. She and her family are the model of politeness and goodness. I hope no ill-intentioned person has defamed them," Frau Wegener said.

That act of bravery brought tears to my eyes. No one

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risked public exposure in front of the authorities in the middle of the war. I looked into my neighbor's cataract-clouded eyes and squeezed her shoulder gratefully.

"We are only following orders. We simply want to speak with your neighbor. Please, go inside and let us do our job in peace," the sergeant said, grabbing the doorknob and slamming the door shut.

The children jumped, and Emily began to cry. I seized the moment to pick her up and press her against my chest. The only words that managed to cut through the grief and solidify in my brain were, "I won't let anyone hurt you, children."

A few seconds later, we were standing in front of our apartment. I fished for the key in my purse stuffed with crackers, tissues, papers, and makeup, but one of the policemen pushed me aside and rapped hard on the door with his fist.

The sound echoed down the stairs. It was still quite early, and the city had not yet emerged from the silence of the night. People were just beginning their morning routines, trying to hide in a normalcy that had ceased to exist a long time ago.

We heard hurried steps, and then the door opened, casting light onto the landing. Johann's mess of dark, curly hair partly covered his eyes, giving him a distinctly disheveled

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appearance. He looked first at the police, then at us. Our eyes silently pleaded with him to somehow protect us, but all he could do was push the door open all the way and let us in.

"Johann Hanstein?" the sergeant asked.

"Yes, Herr *Polizei*," my husband answered with a trembling voice.

"By order of the *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler, all Sinti and Roma of the Reich must be interned in special camps," the sergeant recited. Surely he had repeated this speech dozens of times in recent days.

"But . . . ," my husband started. His big black eyes seemed to devour the eternal instant before the policeman made a sign and his colleagues surrounded my husband and held his arms.

I placed my hand on the sergeant's shoulder. "No, please. You'll terrify the children."

I could sense a slight heaviness in his gaze for a few seconds. Ideas never manage to completely suffocate feeling. A German woman who might be his sister or cousin was talking to him, not a dangerous criminal intent on deceiving him.

"Please allow my husband to get dressed. I'll take the children into another room," I pleaded with him softly, trying to alleviate the violent situation.

The sergeant waved his men away from Johann. But then he barked, "The children are also coming with us."

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Those words were the knife that shredded my insides. I doubled over in the throes of nausea, shaking my head to clear what I had certainly misheard. Where did they want to take my family?

"The children are also Romani. The order includes them as well. Don't worry, you yourself can stay," the sergeant said, trying to explain the new situation to me. Surely my face finally registered the desperation that I had been feeling for many years now.

I tried to argue. "But their mother is German."

"That makes no difference. There's one child missing. My information says there are five children and one father." The sergeant's tone was serious.

I could not respond. Fear had paralyzed me. I tried to swallow back my tears. The children had their eyes glued on me the whole time.

"I'll get them ready in a moment. We'll all go with you. The youngest one is still in bed." I was surprised to hear my voice. The words seemed to come out of some other woman's lips.

"You will not come, Frau Hannemann, only those with tzigane blood, Gypsies," the sergeant said dryly.

"Herr *Polizei*, I will go where my family goes. Please let me pack our bags and get my youngest daughter dressed."

The policeman frowned but waved me out of the room

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with the children. We went to the main bedroom, and, climbing on a chair, I took down the two large cardboard suitcases we kept on top of the wardrobe. I put them on the bed and started putting clothes inside. The children surrounded me in silence. They did not cry, though their anxious faces could not conceal their concern.

"Where are we going, Mama?" asked Blaz, the oldest.

"They're taking us to something like a summer camp, like I showed you once when you were little. Do you remember?" I said, forcing a smile.

"We're going to camp?" Otis, the next oldest, asked. His voice had risen with confused excitement.

"Yes, sweetie. We'll spend some time there. Remember I told you a few years ago your cousins were taken away too? Maybe we'll even see them," I said, attempting an upbeat tone.

The twins really did get excited then, as if my words made them forget everything they had just seen.

"Can we bring the ball? And some skates and other toys?" Ernest asked. He was always ready to organize a plan for playing.

"We'll only take what we absolutely need. I'm sure there are plenty of things for children where we're going." I desperately wanted to believe it might be true.

I knew the Nazis had dragged Jews away from their

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homes, as well as political dissidents and traitors. We had heard rumors that the Reich's "enemies" were interned at concentration camps, but we posed no threat to the Nazis. Surely they would just require us to stay within the bounds of some sort of improvised camp until the war ended.

Adalia woke up then and got scared when she saw the mess on the bed. I picked her up. She was a skinny little three-year-old, with soft features and very pale skin. She was very different from her older siblings, who looked more like their father.

"It's okay, nothing's wrong, honey. We're going on a trip," I said, holding her tight against my chest.

I felt a heavy lump in my throat, and the flood of worry washed over me again. I thought that I should call my parents, that they should at least know where we were being taken, but I doubted the police would let me make a call.

After getting Adalia dressed, I finished with the suitcases and went to the kitchen. I packed a few tins, the little bit of milk we had left, some bread, the remaining scraps of cold cuts, and some crackers. I had no idea how long our journey would take, and I wanted to be prepared.

Back in our tiny living room, I realized my husband was still in his pajamas. I put the two heavy suitcases down and went back to the room to find him some clothes. I picked out his best suit, a brown tie, a hat, and a coat. While

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he changed under the steely watch of the police, I returned to our room and took off my nurse's uniform. The children were lined up against the door, not letting me out of their sight. I picked out a suit with a brown jacket and blue blouse and got dressed the best I could with the younger three all crowded around me. We went back to the living room, and I studied Johann for a moment. Dressed so elegantly, he looked like a Gypsy prince. He put his hat on when I entered the room, and the three policemen turned toward me.

"There's no need for you to come, Frau Hannemann," the sergeant insisted.

I looked straight into his eyes and asked, "Do you think a mother would leave her children in a situation like this?"

"You'd be shocked if I told you all I've seen in the past few years," he answered. "Very well, come with us to the station. We have to get them to the train before ten o'clock."

His comment made me think the trip would be longer than what I had first thought. My husband's family had been deported somewhere to the north, but I presumed they would be taking us to the Gypsy internment camp they had built near Berlin.

We went through the living room to the doorway. My

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husband went first with the suitcases, the two younger policemen on his heels. Then my two older sons, the twins clinging to my coat, and Adalia in my arms. When we stepped out the door onto the landing, I turned to look one last time at our home. I had woken up that morning with the unthinking confidence that we had a normal day ahead of us. Blaz had been a bit nervous about a test he had before recess; Otis had complained of a bad earache, a sure sign he was about to get sick; the twins were healthy as horses but had still grumbled about having to get up so early for school; Adalia was a little angel who always behaved well and tried her best to keep up with her siblings in their games. There had been no sign, no omen that all of this normalcy would amount to nothing a short time later.

The stairwell was not well lit, but a faint glow of early morning sun reached us from the entryway below. For a second I had the stabbing pain of leaving my home, but no, that was not quite right; my home was my five children and Johann. I closed our apartment door and began to descend the stairs, humming the lullaby my children always requested when they were upset or had trouble sleeping. The unspoken words flooded the hollow of the stairwell and calmed the children's hearts as we headed into the unknown.

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Guten Abend, gute Nacht,
mit Rosen bedacht,
mit Näglein besteckt,
schlupf unter die Deck:
Morgen früh, wenn Gott will,
wirst du wieder geweckt,
morgen früh, wenn Gott will,
wirst du wieder geweckt.
Guten Abend, gute Nacht,
von Englein bewacht,
die zeigen im Traum
dir Christkindleins Baum:
Schlaf nur selig und süß,
schau im Traum's Paradies,
schlaf nur selig und süß,
schau im Traum's Paradies.

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TWO

May 1943
Road to Auschwitz

Everything happened really fast. In the loading and unloading zone of the train station, hundreds of people were crammed onto the platforms. At first we were rather dazed. The police had left us with a group of SS soldiers, who in turn had pushed us inside the station. I was startled to see a dark-brown cattle car with its doors wide open, but it did not take me long to understand what was going on. I was still holding Adalia, but now with the other hand I grabbed the cold but sweaty hands of the twins. The older two were clinging to the suitcases Johann was gripping as tightly as he could. The soldiers started pushing us, and the platform slowly emptied as people struggled to get into the cattle

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cars. Johann set the suitcases down and helped Blaz and Otis get in. Then he lifted the twins into the car.

Just then, the pressure from the crowd started to drive me forward. Johann had gotten into the car so I could hand Adalia up to him, but it was all I could do to stay within arm's reach of the car door. Johann grabbed Adalia, but I found myself farther and farther away. A human sea of men, women, and children was sweeping me toward other cars. With my heart heaving, I tried to fight my way back. I took hold of a metal bar on the car and jumped hard, suspended for a split second above the heads of the passing crowd, but a crack at my ribs caught me up short. I turned and saw an SS soldier trying to pry me away with his nightstick. My husband could see what was happening. He crept along the opening of the car to where I was holding my free arm out to him. Our eyes locked as a second blow almost knocked me back down into the crowd. I managed to reach Johann's hand, and he pulled me into the car.

I barely controlled the impulse to vomit as the nauseating stench of the car hit me. It was bad in there. We managed to carve out a space for the children to sit on the hay that reeked of urine and mold. Johann and I stood. With nearly a hundred people crammed inside the car, few could sit.

The train lurched forward and started to advance

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slowly. The movement threw us off balance, but the huddle of bodies all around kept us from falling. The hellish journey had only begun.

Everyone in the train was Gypsy like my husband. At first, people tried to remain calm. But as the hours passed, arguments and fights broke out. Four or five hours in, thirst became a serious issue. Babies were screaming inconsolably, children were hungry, and the elderly were starting to faint from exhaustion and the uncomfortable positions we all were forced to maintain. The train car never stopped lurching and clattering. Despite the fact that it was the beginning of May, it was cold. German afternoons are very cold, and we were headed away from the sun.

By nightfall, panic was setting in until one of the older Gypsy men raised his voice above the din in his ancestral tongue. That managed to calm people down a bit. Johann and a few of the men helped organize the car and mark off one of the corners as a sort of latrine, with a bucket and a blanket hanging down from the ceiling to provide a modicum of privacy.

I seized the moment to give my children a bit of food and a few sips of milk one at a time. The two older ones threw themselves back down on the hay, the twins curled up in the hollows at their feet, and Adalia slipped into the middle.

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There was no light, but none was needed to imagine the fear and sadness on all the travelers' faces. The conditions in which we were transported allowed us no illusions about the kind of life we were being taken to. When Johann returned from setting up the latrine, I could not hold back any longer. I broke down on his shoulder. I tried to muffle my sobs in his jacket so the children would not wake. But tears brought no relief. The harder I cried, the more desperate I felt.

"Don't cry, sweetie. Things will surely get better when we get to the camp. In '36 a lot of Gypsies were interned for the sake of the Olympics, but a few months later they were allowed to return home." Johann's tone was soothing. It was the first time we had spoken since that morning. I allowed myself to be relaxed by the timbre of his voice, as if nothing bad could happen if I stayed by his side.

"I love you," I said, hugging him. How many times since we first met had I told him how I felt. But to love him in that place, surrounded by a desperate horde, was the confirmation of all those years of uninterrupted fidelity.

"The Roma have been persecuted for centuries, and we've always survived. We'll find a way out of this," Johann said, stroking my face.

We had been together over twenty years. We met when we were young and his family showed up in Freital, the town

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outside of Dresden where I was born. My parents were active in our church's outreach projects and helped the Gypsy children integrate into the community. As soon as they saw Johann, they knew he was special. My parents had to overcome the prejudices that have always existed against the Gypsies. Most of our neighbors thought Gypsies could never be trusted. At any moment they might be lying or trying to cheat you. My father got to be friends with Johann's father. His family was mainly in the business of buying and selling horses, but they also sold all sorts of things. Sometimes Johann's dad would come to our house to show us the latest things he had gotten ahold of: table linens hand-sewn in Portugal, sheets, fine towels . . . My mother distrustfully scrutinized the fabric but almost always ended up giving her approval. The two men would wrangle a few moments over the price and then seal the deal with a handshake.

Meanwhile, my eyes were for the boy. With his pronounced cheekbones and square chin, he was every bit the Persian prince to me. Yet we hardly ever spoke. Sometimes we were allowed to play ball in the yard, but we would only look at each other and kick the ball back and forth. My parents took a liking to him. They got him into our elementary school and made sure he made it through high school; then they paid out of their own pocket for him to study at the conservatory.

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One morning Johann's father brought an old pocket watch by our house and swore to my father that it was quartz with gold inlay. After haggling for a while, my father bought the watch. Within two weeks, it had stopped working, and the gold had turned to brass. The two men did not speak for quite some time, but my parents continued supporting Johann. Little by little, as we would walk together to the conservatory, my feelings for him started to grow. Johann did not propose until he had finished his degree. And it did not take him long to become one of the country's finest violinists.

When I told my parents I was in love with Johann, they warned me to think it over well before making a wrong move. We came from very different cultures. In the end, love overcame the obstacles and prejudices of the world around us. Naturally, we suffered a great deal after we married. The laws against Gypsies were very strict. And Gypsies did not like mixing their blood with non-Gypsies, even though they were a bit more lenient in the case of men. Johann had to swear to my parents that he would not be an itinerant Roma. When his family left our town, he came to live at our house.

I remember the days leading up to the wedding. The entire town seemed to be on edge. One of the pastors from our church came to try to dissuade us from contracting

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