



Mary and Tony Strasser sit in their Lake Victoria home. Thalen Zimmerman / Alexandria Echo Press

Love across the pond

Alexandria woman finds passage to America after Russian concentration camp imprisonment

Editor’s note: This is the conclusion of a two-part series that started in the March. 9, issue.

By **Thalen Zimmerman**
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Alexandria
Mary Strasser and her mother, Helen, spent 18 months in a Russian concentration camp after WW II ended. A few years after their release, Mary, her mother and brother and his family would immigrate to America. Not long after arriving, she was introduced to the love of her life and future husband, Tony Strasser.

Near the end of their imprisonment in Russia, Mary Strasser’s mother, Helen Fischer, received a letter and photos from her son, Josef Milliker; in April of 1947.

Mary’s brother had been forcibly drafted into the German army. During this time, he suffered an appendix attack and needed surgery. When he started recovering, he was told he would soon be sent back to the fight, so he ripped open his wound to prolong his time in the hospital. By the time he was healed, the war had ended.

After the war, Mary’s brother moved to Salzburg, Austria, where he met a woman and married. Not knowing where his family was, he wrote to their home address in Vršac.

“How that letter got to us in the concentration camp. I don’t have an answer,” Mary admitted. “I’ve always said it was a miracle; it was supposed to find us. I found out years later that my mother carried a Rosary in her pocket, and she prayed secretly.”

On the road again

Not long after receiving the letter, Mary, Helen, and the rest of the camp were again put on wagons and transported to a new town but abandoned by the Russians this time.

“We were on our own. The Russians were not part of us anymore. They just said you stay here and that, and that’s it,” Mary said.

By this time, Mary was 8, and she and her mother were on their own in an unfamiliar town. But by the grace of God, a family took them in and gave them food, shelter and medicine.

“They took my mother and I and some other people to the doctor. We got medicine for our malaria and other

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MARY STRASSER

things,” said Mary. The next step was to get to her brother in Austria.

Caught 3 times

During the middle of the night in July of 1947, Mary, Helen and 32 others began the journey to the Hungarian border.

“Before we got to the border, we were caught. There was some post where the Russians were, and they had German Shepherd dogs. They must have sniffed us. Because they came barking and found us,” remembers Mary.

By this time, it was early morning. When the Russians approached the group, they acted civilly. They gave the group food and held them at the post until the next shift took over. Then they led the group themselves to the border.

Out of the group was a family of three also traveling to Austria, Mary and Helen decided to travel with them, and together the five—some continued their journey.

Mary said they walked many kilometers a day and slept in barns at night. They crossed cornfields, remote landscapes, Russian-occupied towns, worked odd jobs for food, and contracted malaria, again. And twice more, they were caught and questioned but always released.

Finally, on Nov. 1, 1947, they entered the city of Salzburg, Austria and reunited with her brother. Mary was so malnourished she was still nothing but skin, bones and a bloated stomach.

Austria

Mary soon started school for the first time at nine years old, and her mother took multiple jobs to provide for them.

After four years of living in Austria, her mother heard of a program helping people immigrate to America, the National Catholic Welfare Conference.

Helen began going to presentations that displayed what America had to offer immigrants. Being a farmer, she was especially interested in the big cattle ranches in Texas. However, she thought the idea of a man in a white coat dropping off crates of milk from door to door was

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propaganda. Nonetheless, she was sold.

Coming to America

At first, Josef was hesitant about coming to America. He was comfortable with the life he started to build in Austria with his wife, who now had two children, but he got on board when he saw his mom was serious about immigrating.

All in all, between questioning about Nazi affiliation from the American Consulate, paperwork, physicals and immunizations, it took over a year for the family to finally board the ship.

On Aug. 25, 1951, just a few days before Mary’s 13th birthday, she and her mother set sail for New York City on the U.S.S. General W. C. Langfitt. Ten days later, they arrived in New York City.

Reunited

“They probably told us in New York, where my brother was, but we couldn’t understand English,” said Mary.

Josef arrived in America weeks prior due to Mary and Helen’s paperwork issues.

I would never have thought when my mother told me we were coming to America and fireworks came up my brain that we would have a life as we have here. Just days after arriving in New York City, Mary and Helen boarded a train to Chicago and then to Duluth.

“My mother just about went nuts on the train, not knowing where her son and his family was. She thought she had made a mistake coming here,” Mary remembers. “It was all her idea. And she’ll never see her son and his family and her grandchildren again. She was just beside herself.

When they arrived in Duluth on Sept. 6, they were finally reunited with Josef, and Mary said her mother never had regrets about coming to America again. Especially when she saw the milkman was real.

Helen took a job as a



Mary Strasser, upper right, stands next to her brother, Josef Milliker, in a family portrait with his wife and children with their mother, Helen Fischer, lower center. Thalen Zimmerman / Alexandria Echo Press

housekeeper at St. Mary’s hospital in Duluth, and Mary enrolled in 16 one-hour English classes in preparation for school. She learned by reading books like “Dick and Jane.”

“My mother said I learned English in three weeks. Well, I don’t think that’s quite true. But it was not hard for me. I got better grades in English than I did in German in Austria,” Mary said.

She fell in love with me

“On April 13, 1952, it was Easter Sunday. I met Tony,” Mary said.

Tony Strasser, originally from Yugoslavia, also immigrated to America with his family after the war. Tony’s mother had a mutual friend with Mary’s mom who invited both families over for Easter dinner.

“When I saw the blond hair he had, and I saw the blue eyes...” Mary broke off mid-memory.

“She fell in love with me,” Tony finished with a grin.

A year after meeting, Tony asked her out on a date through a letter.

“I was thrilled. And I cried when I got the letter. My sister-in-law asked, ‘What are you crying for?’ And I showed it to my mother, and I thought she’ll never let me go,” said Mary.

But Helen let Mary go under one condition. They needed to have a chaperone with them.

Between Helen, Mary’s brother and sister-in-law, or her 5-year-old nephew, Tony and Mary were never alone on their dates. Until one day Tony went to talk to Helen about his intentions and she gave them the “OK” to be alone.

“I don’t know what he told her, but she must have believed him,” said Mary.

And on July 14, 1956, they got married, six weeks before Mary’s 18th birthday.

They lived in Duluth for eight years, then moved to Lamberton for 45 until eventually retiring in Alexandria. In their years together, they became U.S. citizens, Tony joined the Army, they raised a family, and their love continued to grow, along with their patriotism. Tony Strasser passed away on March. 7, 2022.

“God bless America. I am so proud to be an American. Thank you for the life we have here,” Mary said. “We love this land so much. Never abuse your freedom. Don’t ever do something to this flag that I think so much of because it represents freedom.”

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