Theresienstadt

By Julia Pascal

After Sylvia married Michel in the small French town of Maubeuge they talked of driving east for their honeymoon. The Wall had been down for five years. All of Eastern Europe was before them.

They drove through Belgium, hot sun shining on the gold bands they'd bought in Paris. Sylvia looked at her new French husband. To get a middle-aged French mayor to leave his wife and his mistress was quite an achievement. One Bastille Day, he wrote identical letters to both saying he was leaving with Sylvia.

His guilt was double. In pained silence his wife of thirty-five years had waited patiently for Michel to leave the mistress. Equally, the mistress, who worked at the same school as the wife, expected she'd be Michel's retirement partner. Now this young foreign-looking woman had turned up to smash everything.

Without waiting for their rage, Michel escaped to London and Sylvia's bed. From the cool sheets he called his children and admitted all, as his deserted wife called her eighty-year-old mother-in-law to tell her Michel had run off with a 'Jewish dancer'. But Michel knew nothing of all this. He was numbed by his own daring and flew off with Sylvia to San Francisco. They crossed the Golden Gate and marvelled at the strange familiarity that was A-M-E-R-I-C-A-M-E-R-I-Q-U-E.

At the airport they hired a convertible white Mustang and just drove. When tired, they stopped off at roadside cafés and swapped stories with men who had been young at Omaha Beach. They met blacks liberated from a racist America by a racist war in Europe. Ah la belle France! they said, thinking of all those demoiselles who threw themselves willingly at the 'yankees' after four years of the 'bosch'.

In fractured English, Michel remembered being four years old on dusty paths out of Douai for the safety of the coast.

When he and his mother arrived exhausted in Boulogne, German soldiers were there already sunning themselves on the beach in that hot summer of 1940.

Michel and Sylvia continued the long coastal drive, listening to country music on the car radio, far from the anger of rejected women back in France.

Each night they stayed in a different motel, like people did in movies. Ahead was Monterey. Sylvia bought her tall, rangy Frenchman a cowboy's hat which looked odd with his continental designer specs.

MONT-ER-EY. The word was magic and they repeated it like a song as they walked down the pier, completely astounded by colonies of lazy sea otters, sleeping, flippers around each other, in the laze of the Bay.

After Monterey, Sylvia accompanied him back to Maubeuge for two years until her situation as the too dark-haired live-in-mistress became impossible. The people had been used to the man with the wife and the mistress. This new situation upset them. Sylvia was tiring of the endless questions. Older men and women would ask with a bite in their tone, 'Are you Madame or Mademoiselle?' while younger ones screamed across the street, 'salope'. Slut. Others spat 'Pasqua, Pasqua'. They had just learnt of Charles Pasqua's new laws against immigrants and when they sing songed Pasqua to her it meant 'foreigner, go home'.

It was exhausting to be hated as a supposed Algerian just because her hair was dark, when she was an English Jew. And, if Sylvia declared her true identity, there were jokes about Jews and money or comments straight out of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

La Belle France was beginning to stink.

Life changed when Sylvia stopped being Mademoiselle. Michel lost the hollows in his cheeks and wondered why he'd been so scared. Now he told everyone he was newly-married at nearly sixty, and boasted of his younger wife. In the Town Hall, she wore the simple white l930s dress she bought in Vichy, as women his age pretended to be glad for him and silently wished the foreign, man-stealing bitch dead.

The drive east was hot. In the Czech woods, girls paraded in shorts, their buttocks hanging openly beneath the skimp. As Michel and Sylvia drove the smart Renault into Prague's suburbs, shacks offering *Zimmer Frei* made them think about bed.

They entered a shaky, old shed where an elderly couple were renting a cheap Prague apartment. Sylvia did the deal and wondered why, here in Czechoslovakia, the foreigners' language was always German. Dollars changed hands and, in the city centre, a large, dusty flat awaited them. The quasi-landlord showed them around, taking Sylvia to one side with a warning to say nothing to nosy neighbours. 'If you have to, say you are my cousin', he warned. 'From France.'

The owner probably made his living renting out to tourists. No tax. No receipt. No papers. They could be murdered in their beds, she thought, and who would know?

At eight they made sure they were dressed when the man arrived with yesterday's French newspapers, white rolls, ersatz jam and waxy cheese.

'Alles OK?'

'Alles OK'

That first morning, after breakfast, Sylvia said, 'Let's go to Theresienstadt.'

Michel looked up from *Le Monde*. 'What's Theresienstadt?'

They drove out of the city, through the countryside, and to their astonishment they saw how Empress Marie Theresa's city mirrored the town of Maubeuge. Theresienstadt was larger but it was how Maubeuge must have been before the Germans razed it in 1940. Both were barracks towns and both proved how Louis XIV's architect, Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban, was certainly a cross border success.

The Prague summer was stifling. Michel's Renault had no air-conditioning. Prague had no air-conditioning. Theresienstadt was clammy.

They parked where the railway line was grassed over, near a cemetery. The headstones had no names, only numbers. Theresienstadt's crematorium had been turned into a museum with a photo display of the 1940s Prague Jewish artistic elite. Sylvia stared at the stills from operas staged to fool the Red Cross. The Nazis had filled this camp with twenty thousand tulips from Amsterdam as part of the charade.

When the Swiss left, the opera singers and actors filled the next trains. Destination Auschwitz.

What happened to the flowers?

Sylvia watched Michel looking at the faces of the young men and women on the wall. The set designers, the painters, the composers.

What was he thinking, he whose childhood was American soldiers liberating Douai? He who first tasted corned beef from a black GI's cooking pot heated on a jeep engine.

On this strange Theresienstadt honeymoon, was he thinking of his first in Rome?

Sylvia knew all about the look of postwar Rome because, when he moved in with her, he arrived with bundles of old letters and photos. In Kodak black and white he was a new groom, gawkily holding the hand of a toothy girl in a headscarf and shirt-waister.

'I married too young', he told her. 'Even at the time I thought I could do better.'

Good. Better. Best.

He spoke of a secret knowledge that one day he would meet a woman with a foreign accent who would change his life.

And in Theresienstadt, she thought of how in Prague fifty years ago they could never have married. The love nights of Jew and Christian were *verboten*.

The museum had a lower level to this room. One step down led to the polished silver ovens where bodies were burnt.

Theresienstadt was not a death camp. It was an assembly point where people just died. If they

were lucky. Starvation. Typhoid. Beating. It was better to die in Marie Theresa's city than to be shipped to the gas chamber in Poland.

Sylvia removed the glasses she wore for distance and loaded her camera. If you look through a lens, you feel nothing. This she learnt in Spain at her first bullfight. There she had sat in the shade of the arena with women and children dressed in fancy frocks. Opposite in the cheaper sun seats sat their men. A communal Olé! filled the air as the matador pierced the bull. Sylvia was surprised at how the beast buckled into a bleeding mass, to be immediately dragged across hot dust by pure white horses. Behind the lens the event had seemed spectacular.

Without it, she was all vomit. Oh yes she needed the camera. Here there was no bull. Here there were rooms with shiny silver ovens to cremate the bodies. Behind the lens she made sure the ovens were in focus. She made sure she was thinking only about the frame.

At noon Michel and Sylvia left the crematorium because at noon the French stomach empties and the brain turns to sog.

On Theresienstadt Square there was one café, overlooked by the barracks. Sylvia ordered chicken and when it arrived she knew it was pork. For a Jewish atheist she had a fine nose for pork. As the meat entered her mouth it stuck like a stone. She spat it out as delicately as possible and looked up from her plate to see a crowd of elderly Israelis arriving on a coach trip from Prague.

They spoke Hebrew, but from their voices it was clear they had been born on this continent. Perhaps they had been prisoners here.

A guide with a voice like Golda Meir came over to Sylvia. Jew recognising Jew, she examined Sylvia's uneaten meat.

'Believe me, it's chicken. When they say it's chicken then it's not pork.'

Golda Meir looked at the Englishwoman accusingly.

'What is it? Are you kosher?'

'No, I'm not kosher', Sylvia declared angrily, and then wondered what business it was of hers and why she had replied.

There is an unwritten law between Jews.

You can always ask direct questions

Who are you?

Who were your parents?

How did they survive?

Or die?

'I was in Theresienstadt', Golda Meir said, 'as a young girl.'

She moved off with her party and Sylvia lost all appetite. Michel was keen to have pudding. She thought how, for a Frenchman, he was remarkably adaptable about food. As long as he ate at midday, what he ate almost didn't matter.

Normally they took a siesta after lunch, but today they could only walk to the prison area, past the gallows square and into lines of cells. The cells looked unchanged. They stank of death.

Overlooking the prison was a huge cross.

'Shit', she muttered loudly, 'Bloody Catholic Church is everywhere'. He didn't understand her English, but he understood her meaning. Why was she always angry?

The sun was setting and the ghost town was emptying. The Israelis got on to their coach and disappeared back to Prague.

Outside the prison, children played in the street and, in a half-hidden waste ground, old Soviet tanks were rotting in high grass.

As they got into the hot Renault for the drive back to Prague she noticed.

'Wait! My glasses.'

'Maybe you left them in the café?'

The waiter who had served pork was drinking coffee at a table and smoking a cigarette.

'No, not here, but the caretaker found a pair.' He pointed to an old man drinking a Bud.

'You got a car?' The old man's German was perfect.

Michel helped the caretaker into the back seat of the Renault and drove him half a mile to his grandson's flat to find the keys.

Sylvia asked questions and the caretaker, pleased by the attention, answered directly.

'Yes. I was here during the war. Not in Theresienstadt. The Germans evacuated Theresienstadt and we locals worked in another camp, a few kilometres away. When the Communists took over' (he said the word as if it defiled his mouth) 'the Czechs threw us out. Back to Germany. But we German Czechs, we returned.'

She knew about the other camp. It was a death camp. This man must have been a guard. In any event, he was clearly a collaborator or Czech German Nazi. Maybe he was part of the Czech SS.

They drove to a block of modern flats near the museum. The caretaker got out of the car and shouted to attract attention. A youth looked out of a fifth floor window, conversed with the old man in Czech and came down with the keys.

'My grandson.' The caretaker plumped up with pride.

Sylvia said nothing, her head full of the faces of the young men on the museum wall, the men who never had grandsons.

The caretaker took Sylvia into the locked museum while Michel waited in the Renault.
She followed him into his office. He walked slowly. They were alone. He opened the drawer in his desk and, as he leant forward, she knew she could kill him.
Sylvia remembered stories of women in London who lifted double-decker buses to save their child pinioned under the wheels.
She did not want to save a child. She wanted to kill an old man.
How easily he had told her of his work in the death camp. This old man had been an active part of the killing machine. A tiny part of the whole mechanics. And now he was given the position of caretaker in Theresienstadt. Showing Jews round this place he partially helped happen.
She wanted to strangle him. To put her strong hands around his scragneck and squeeze him to death. She wanted to strangle him for having children and grandchildren. For coming back from Communist expulsion here and daring to be the CARE-TAKER of this place of dead Jews.
And who would ever know?
Michel and she would just drive off into Prague.
Nobody knew where they were staying. There were no visas. No official papers. No record of their being here. They would continue east to Budapest and anonymity.

She was sweating as she came back to the car with her glasses in her hand.
'Ça va?' Michel asked, sensing her change.
'Ça va', she lied.
As she opened the car door, and got into the passenger seat, she looked behind. Nobody.
'Allons-y', she told Michel. 'Let's go back to Prague now'.
He kissed her and turned on the ignition.
As they passed the large cross and tracked by the grassy rail, the barracks town was disappearing from the back window.
It was behind them now.
Behind.
Sylvia opened the window and breathed very deeply. She put her glasses into her pocket and told Michel, 'Drive fast will you'.
