

## IRON CURTAIN

A small news item caught my attention the other day. It was a story about a long-awaited reunion between a group of North and South Korean families who had not seen each other for thirty-nine years, since North Korea had become Communist and instituted its own Iron Curtain. During the following years, with thousands of Korean families divided into two separate worlds, North Korea ignored pleas for family reunions and denied any such need.

But after years of negotiations and months of preparation, a reunion had finally come about, under the scrutiny of television, the press and the watchful eyes of the whole world. Some three dozen people -- the lucky ones -- were selected for this traumatic event. Men and women in their sixties and seventies, not even sure that they recognized each other after such a long separation, were embracing, laughing, and crying. It was a joyous occasion, and many viewers were probably touched by that emotional outpouring. I was very moved, yet I found the prying of the media into their personal feelings painful to watch. This episode also reminded me of the long years in Communist Romania, when we were all waiting and dreaming of a similar reunion.

After the war, as the years passed, Romania became increasingly insulated and hostile to the western world, and we felt more and more cut off from our family abroad. How long did it take me to realize that the separation might be forever? There seemed to be little hope to see my brothers again. Would my children ever know their cousins? The Iron Curtain, the virtual barrier that separated the Soviet Union and its satellites from the rest of the world, became also a metaphor for our heavy feeling of hopelessness.

I hadn't seen my oldest brother, Alter, since May 1944, when he was on his way to the Russian front for forced labor. Yossie had left Romania after his return from a Stalinist camp in Siberia in 1946. Now they both lived in New York. Tzali's brother Bela, after leaving Sighet in 1947, spent a few years in Israel, and also ended up in New York. Miki had been in Italy since I was a young girl. The last time I saw him was when he came home on vacation from medical school around 1935. Ezu and Ebi were in Brazil. Ezu had returned to Sighet only briefly after his liberation in 1945, but Ebi did not return home since he had left in 1942 to go to a trade school in Budapest. So many brothers, all so far away for so many years.

In 1957 we were living in Hunedoara. Visits to or from abroad were unheard of. Traveling to other Communist countries like Hungary or Czechoslovakia was considered a "favor," to be granted only to the privileged few who "deserved" it. For a long time even travel inside Romania, to border cities, was restricted. Any communication with the West was discouraged, and receiving packages was barely tolerated. How many times were we reproached for "maintaining relations with capitalistic countries," meaning that we corresponded with our family in the West!

Then something unprecedented happened. We heard that somebody, in some other city, had been permitted to visit a family member in Paris. This was almost a miracle, if it was true. I got very excited. I felt as though a cloud was being parted, and for the first time a patch of blue sky was becoming visible. We hardly dared to hope.

But soon another rumor reached us, about a person in Bucharest who was also allowed to travel abroad to see a sister. It seemed unbelievable. Very cautiously, I started to make inquiries. Among my patients were some officers from the secret police, the *Securitate*, and when they came to the hospital I hinted in our conversation to trips abroad. Were the rumors true? Did they think that someone like me could ever get a visa? Should I apply?

Obviously I couldn't ask to go to the United States, but perhaps a trip to Rome might be granted. I wrote to my brothers. They all became very excited and assured me that if I could get to Italy, they would all meet me there. I would, of course, have to travel alone, leaving the rest of the family behind to guarantee my return. This was clearly understood -- it was inconceivable to do otherwise.

I finally decided to take the gamble. I went to the police station and filed a formal application to travel to Italy. The officials were surprised, but they didn't say "Yes" and they didn't say "No," so apparently the rumors were true. There followed a few weeks of intense activity. I was called back several times for questioning and for additional information. I had to provide all sorts of documents, including an affidavit from Italy. I had to have a passport photo made. It all filled me with hope. The dream seemed possible!

This created a sensation in our provincial town. News spread, and everyone seemed to know about it. At home and with our friends we talked about almost nothing but my impending trip. What would it be like? Would my brothers recognize me? What should I take for them? What would I bring back? My friends were eager to give advice. They envied me my chance to go abroad, find out how it was "over there," and have a taste the free world, away from the oppressive atmosphere of Communism.

Meanwhile I started to prepare. I bought a few fabrics and took them to the best dressmaker in town. She was thrilled to make dresses that would be worn in Rome, and advised me on the latest fashions. I still remember those three outfits: an off-white silk shantung dress with a loose jacket; an elegant, low-cut, shiny charcoal-gray evening dress with a jacket, and a green wool suit for cool evenings, all beautiful and expensive. I was in a state of euphoria and restlessness. I expected this trip to give me emotional nourishment for years to come. It might have to sustain me forever. I started studying Italian, which sounded so romantic after listening to Verdi and Rossini.

But months passed and nothing happened. No official response was made, and I knew it was futile to inquire. Whenever a patient from the *Securitate* was on my ward he would say, "Oh, you're the doctor who applied to go to Italy." I had become an "interesting" person, one who dared to ask permission to go abroad. I would respond by asking their opinion, did they think I would get approval? "Why not, comrade?" they would often reply, "You have a good record." That was it. It all came down to my "record."

My brothers were becoming impatient, writing more often and asking when I would come. It was by now late summer of 1958, almost a year since I had applied. My anticipation and my hopes were slowly fading, turning into doubt and disappointment. By now I was asking myself, "Will approval ever come?"

Then one day I was called for another interview at the police station. Two officers explained that they wished to speak to me in connection with my petition (as if I had any doubt about it). They were very polite and again asked me lots of questions about my family, about my brothers, why they were all abroad, how I would meet those from the United States. What about my husband? Didn't he have relatives abroad, too? Had we corresponded with them all those years? Of course they already knew all the answers.

Finally came the question I was hoping for.

"Are you, comrade, ready for the trip?" My heart started to pound.

"Sure I am," I replied eagerly.

"Suppose you get the approval soon -- are you dressed to travel to Rome?"

"Yes, I am well dressed. I could leave at any time." I understood their concern that I might wear shabby clothes abroad. I was only too happy to tell them about my new outfits.

They left it at that, saying that they would let me know soon. My hopes rose again: the trip seemed almost within reach.

But then something even more unthinkable happened. The news that Jews would be allowed to apply for emigration to Israel swept through the

Jewish population. In a few days, it was said, application forms would be available at the police stations. How this incredible change of policy came about we never found out, but it caused quite a commotion among our friends.

What were we to do? Should I keep trying for the Italian visa which seemed to be so imminent? Or should we grab the new chance for all of us to leave for good? The delay and uncertainty about my attempt to simply visit my brothers abroad for a few weeks, made us realize that we couldn't trust any promises at all. I might get a visa -- or I might never get one.

On the other hand, there was no assurance that an attempt to emigrate would be any more successful, and clearly if we applied I would lose any prospect of traveling to Italy. We might end up with neither and with all kinds of reprisals. And what of Zsuzsi and Pauli? If we left, Zsuzsi would not want to stay on alone. And the idea of all of us going together was a dream we had not even contemplated before.

We had no time to weigh all this. Everyone wanted to be among the first to file an application, for no one knew if there would be enough for all the Jews who wanted to leave, and whether, or more likely when, the Party would reverse this policy. After one long, sleepless night we made our momentous decision: we would give it all we had, take all the risks. We would apply to emigrate -- all of us.

And we did.

I will tell you another time about the long years of waiting. By the time we arrived in Rome to meet Miki I had not seen him for twenty-six years, almost as long as the North and South Koreans. Our reunion was as emotional as theirs, but fortunately it remained private and intimate.

*October 30, 1985*