Heart-Rending Stories Of Happenings Behind Iron Curtain

One of the most heart-rending stories coming from behind the Iron Curtain is the plight of those seeking to get out. In this article Edmund Stevens — veteran Moscow correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor—now writing from Berlin—describes the sad case of the Russian-born women who married foreigners and were denied the right to leave their country with their husbands.

A current Moscow anecdote concerns Ivan Petrovich, who is sent abroad on "kakmandirovka" (official business assignment). From Warsaw, his first stop, he wires the home office: "Long live Poland, free and independent." Next, from Prague, he wires "Long live Czechoslovakia, free and independent!"

The cables are repeated in the same vein as Petrovich journeys to Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and other satellite countries. Then, after a period of silence, comes a message from Switzerland that reads: "Long live Petrovich, free and independent!" That's the last Moscow hears of this particular Ivan, according to the anecdote.

To Soviet wives of foreigners, trying for years to join their husbands abroad, to husbands struggling to free wives and children whom the Soviets claim, this story has tragic poignancy beyond all humor. To them the Iron Curtain is no abstract Churchillian metaphor, but something very hard and impenetrable.

Let the record tell the story. It includes the names of some 350 Soviet wives of American citizens who have sought permission to leave the country in the past nine years. Of these, 15 women married former members of the American Embassy staff in Moscow. Ninety-seven of the others are wives of United States veterans.

Apart from the embassy cases, the great majority are from former eastern Poland, the Baltic states, Ruthenia, or Bessarabia, and were married before 1939—that is to say, before these territories were annexed by the Soviets and Soviet citizenship automatically were conferred on all the inhabitants.

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As the Soviet Union never has admitted the right of expatriation, the rule is that Soviet citizens are permitted to go abroad only in the interests of the government. Personal reasons, however compelling, cut no ice with the MVD (secret police) officials who pass on exit visa applications.

Nevertheless, up until a few years ago one or two Soviet wives of American citizens were let out every year. But since August, 1946, even this tiny trickle has been cut off.

In another move in this direction, on Feb. 15, 1947, the Soviet Government issued a decree prohibiting Soviet citizens from marrying foreigners. This grotesque attempt to legislate affairs of the heart is not something the Soviet leaders are proud of or care to advertise, for the announcement was buried in the columns of the Official Journal of the Supreme Soviet, something few persons ever read.

To my knowledge, the decree never has been published or referred to in the Soviet press at large. When I mentioned it to Russians their first reaction was one of utter incredulity. When correspondents tried to send the story abroad it was killed by the censor.

What makes this law especially brutal is the apparent intent to apply it retroactively.

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It works like this. When a wife who has been waiting years for an exit visa goes round to the visa department for a routine inquiry on the status of her application she is received by a "sympathetic" official, who, across the baize green desk top where her file folder lies open, offers her "fatherly" advice:

"Are you really quite sure you want to go to America, citizeness?" he inquires solicitously, "especially after the news from there? Why, with the crisis coming on, your husband may lose his job any day and you yourself be out on the street, starving."

After a pause to let this dire warning sink in, he adds: "Besides, you as a Russian will be under suspicion everywhere. The Un-American Activities Committee will be after you. You won't have a moment's peace. And remember, if you go, it's for good. Never again can you set foot on your homeland."

Another pause, during which the official thumbs through her file. When he resumes talking, his kindly tone has steeled slightly: "Citizeness, it may take a long time to get your exit permit—a long time." (Outright re usals are not in accord with usual Soviet practice.)

Then, in a more persuasive note: "You are young, attractive. Is it really worth wasting the best years of your life for the sake of a foreigner? Is he really worth it? What's wrong with our Soviet fellows? Look around you!"

Next, with a wrathful crescendo rising to thundering climax: "I cannot understand how you, who claim to be a loyal Soviet citizen, can be prepared to renounce your birthright, to desert the socialist motherland that raised and educated you, for an American!"

If, at this point, the victim shows obvious signs of mental anguish, the inquisitor suddenly relents: "Here, here, Citizeness, I did not wish to hurt your feelings. I simply was trying to help you with sound advice—not as an official but as an older fellow countryman. Go home—think it over."

* * *

At home, the chances are that if the wife happens to live with her parents, and likely as not in the same room, she is the target of constant nagging. Her family choruses:

"It's all very well if you choose to wreck your own life and queer yourself. But you've no right to ruin our lives. By getting yourself mixed up with foreigners, you've brought us all under observation—you'll get us all into trouble. It's time to put an end to it. Forget about that America. You'll never see it anyway."

Possibly, she and her family will also be needled in some way by the house manager — registration formalities.

Few persons have the moral stamina to resist such browbeating indefinitely. Sooner or later, all but the most steadfast wives have "voluntarily" broken down and filed for divorce. In such cases, the stringent Soviet divorce laws suddenly are relaxed. A process that usually takes many months is completed in a few days. The requirement that both parties must appear before the court is summarily waived.

To crown her humiliation, the wife also is "persuaded" to write a letter to Pravada or Izvestia publicly repudiating her husband, denouncing his country in the approved manner and voicing her "wish" to remain in the beloved Soviet homeland.

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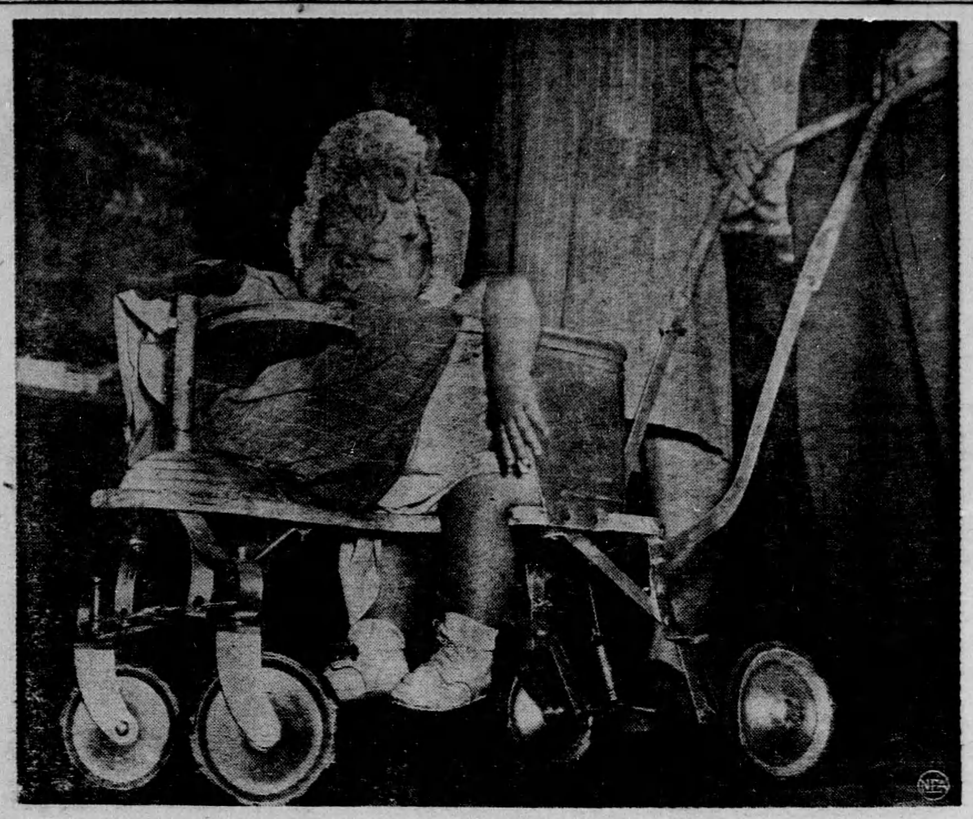
Things have not gone well with the few girls who stubbornly have clung to their hearts' desire. There was the Soviet wife of a certain American foreign service officer. Having tried but failed to get a Soviet exit visa for her and their small child, he had to leave upon termination of his Moscow assignment.

Six months later the house manager—a profession which in Russia includes the duties of police informer—came to the flat she shared with her parents and announced she no longer could be registered there and must move out immediately. When she pleaded that she had nowhere to go, the house manager sneered: "Go to the Americans; they'll look after you."

She was given lodging and a job as housekeeper at an embassy billet. One day a week later she failed to return from a trip to the market, and has not been heard from since. The customary diplomatic representations to the Foreign Ministry have produced the customary silence.

Wives of Americans and Britons are by no means the only victims of the no-exit-visa policy. The case of the son of the former Chilean ambassador in Moscow was brought before the United Nations. Another case involved the Russian wife of the Greek ambassador. In neither instance did ambassadorial rank carry weight with the visa department.



Just Plain Pooped—For his alertness in spotting the human interest qualities in this scene and for his skill in following through with the camera, Rudolph Vetter, photographer, was awarded a $25 prize. The attitude of the dozing damsel, 7-month-old Sharon Hart, shows how completely tuckered out she was after an exciting all-day tour of the Fair and Livestock Show.

The Smile That Convicts

By Louise Lee Outlaw

On and on droned the voice of the prosecutor. Above him, on the bench, the judge seemed half asleep eyes drooping wearily. At an oaken table, the defense attorney, a small, stringy man, slouched beside the defendant. In the jury box, the jury shifted restlessly and coughed and shifted again.

It was the last day of the trial, and they were all tired, tired of the volumes of words that had been poured into the record, tired of the mountains of evidence that weighed on their minds, and yet receded whenever they tried to pluck from the mountain one clear fact.

Only Juror Number Five, a woman, looked attentive. She sat upright, shoulders independent of the straight-backed chair. From a distance of twenty feet she looked young. From a distance of ten feet she looked almost young. She was dressed in the relentless, gloomy perfection of the prosperous business woman. Periodically her eyes shifted from the prosecutor and gazed avidly at the defendant.

Juror Number Five was Mrs. Edith Bolton. She was a Madison Avenue interior decorator. The defense attorney knew those things about her, and felt he knew many more. As the prosecutor rumbled on, the defense attorney turned to the defendant and whispered, "Remember what I told you—keep smiling at Number Five."

The defendant's broad shoulders moved irritably.

"Okay." The defense attorney drew in a hoarse breath. "But remember—it isn't enough that we know you're innocent. She's got to know it, too. I told you, the jury's going to listen to her. You'd better smile, boy."

The defendant, charged with first-degree murder, glanced at Juror Number Five. Painfully, he lifted his lips.

Edith Bolton caught the smile and was thoroughly conscious of what had prompted it.

A bribe, she thought. Oh, he's a shrewd one.

She turned quickly back to the garrulous prosecutor, tried to listen to him, tried to wriggle away from the memory of the smile. But the smile persisted, hung before her in the air—the full, firm lips, curling a little at the edges, curling sweetly like a girl's . . .

Cheater's lips, liar's lips. Jimmy's lips.

But she mustn't let herself fly off; she must be fair. She had always been fair. It wasn't the defendant's fault that he looked like Jimmy. It had nothing to do with the case. She would base her decision on factual evidence, comb through the maze of circumstances, pluck out the telling fact . . .

She felt her eyes easing back to the defendant at the oaken table, twelve feet from where she sat. Once more she saw the thick eyelashes, the high, unlined forehead, the disarming, wavy hair. Smooth-faced, pretty-faced, full of smiles. The kind, who smiled from the cradle up, smiled and got what he wanted, smiled and plundered . . .

Edith Bolton jerked her shoulders, snapped off the thought. It was her business to listen to the prosecutor—to listen hard, with judicial ears.

"And the State has shown," the prosecutor said, "that the defendant robbed and caused the death of a man who had befriended him—a man who, out of the goodness of his heart, had given him a decent job, started him on a career . . ."

Yes, that was the way it worked. You took the smiling charmer in, you gave him everything in exchange for nothing. You bought his clothes, you fed him, you put his name on your shop window: "James and Edith Bolton, Decorators, New York and Miami." You made up papers—"James and Edith Bolton, Associates"—and in a breath's time you signed away half the business you'd sweated to build. Each week you wrote a check for him, his share of the profits, the share for which he never worked. "What do I know about this fancy-pants business?" Smiling, smiling, pocketing the check . . .

But that was Jimmy. That had nothing to do with the defendant. She'd have to clear her mind, keep it clean and open, review the facts one by one . . .

Fact Number One: The defendant had been in the Army for three years; he was a veteran of North Africa and Anio. Easy to imagine him in uniform, ribbons on his chest, overseas cap cocky over his forehead, over the dipping black hair . . . Jimmy had had ribbons, too, and a jaunty set to his cap, and he had smiled at her over the heads of the pretty young hostesses at the Canteen. And later that night, they had talked and talked, and she had been faint with delight when he touched her . . .

But the defendant. She had to think of the defendant. Fact Number Two: The defendant had been honorably discharged from the Army. He had gotten a job with a clothing manufacturer, at forty-five dollars a week. Forty-five dollars wasn't much to live on . . .

Jimmy had spent almost as much on a single shirt. "Forty dollars for one shirt!" She had stared at him, waiting for the explanation that didn't come. Just the smile, the hand on her shoulder, weakening her. "What's mine is yours, baby," he had said, "and vice versa right? For better or for worse . . ."

Fact Number Three: The defendant had a wife and child. Forty-five dollars a week wasn't much for a wife and child. A coat for his wife, the defendant had said, a woollen coat to keep her warm. But his employer had caught him in the stockroom, the stolen coat over his arm. They struggled, the prosecutor said. The employer's gun went off. Two hours later, the employer died at Bellevue Hospital.

But the defense had a different story. There had been no struggle, the defense claimed. The defendant had started to run from the stockroom. The employer pursued him, gun in hand. At the bottom of the stairs, the defendant turned, said, "Okay—I give up," but it was too late then. The employer had tripped—come tumbling down the stairs, and his gun went off.

Who could prove the defendant hadn't wrestled with the man? Who could prove the defendant had intended to give himself up? There were no witnesses.

And the story about the coat—a coat for his wife. That was a shrewd excuse, designed to make the jurors' heart swell with pity. The innocent, uplifted face, the dangling forelock. "I wanted a warm winter coat for my wife . . ."

They knew how to find excuses, the smilers. With Jimmy it had been his mother. When the checking account was overdrawn, it had been for his mother. When he got a bank loan he could never pay back, it had been for his mother. His mother—who was slim-waisted and blonde and twenty-two. What did he give her now? Whom was he robbing now for his mother?

"The defendant has a clean record," the defense had said. Excellent character, the Army records had claimed. A fine boy, the character witnesses had added. Devoted to his wife, the defendant's neighbors had agreed.

But what did neighbors know? "You and Jimmy make such a sweet couple," her friends had said so often—her older friends, that is. They were the ones he didn't smile at, the ones who couldn't possibly know the nights she spent listening to his ugly flippancies . . . and worse, the nights she spent alone . . .

But she had to listen to the prosecutor. The prosecutor's voice was high, indignant, as if he knew she was slipping away from him. Edith Bolton straightened, dutifully fastened her eyes on his flushed vehement face.

"We have only the defendant's word," the prosecutor said. "We have only the defendant's word—the word of an admitted thief—against the very tangible evidence of death. How much can you trust the word of a man who would steal from an employer who had been kind to him, exceedingly generous to him?"

Edith Bolton glanced past the prosecutor's waving hands, once again sought out the defendant, and then let her eyes drift to the defendant's wife. She was a thin, pale woman, anguished, exhausted. A few years older than the defendant, and afraid of those years . . .

"Look, grandma," Jimmy had said, "you may be going home tonight, but I'm not. Now, don't get on your high horse. For better or for worse, you know . . ."

The defendant's wife was gazing at the defendant. Edith Bolton saw the woman's worshipping, owning eyes.

Women had always looked that way at Jimmy. Everywhere, always. The customers in her own shop. The trim, stupid assistant decorator. The sagging, avaricious rug buyer—even the seventeen-year-old stock girl with the hanging slip, the run-down heels. Rich or poor, rheumatic or infantile, they all looked at Jimmy.

But she had to stop straying, Edith Bolton told herself sternly. She mustn't think of Jimmy in the back of the shop, the stock girl in his arms. She musn't think of anything now but this trial. There was a decision to make—there was no time left for debating or wondering. In five or ten minutes the prosecutor would end his summation. The jurors would retire. They would listen to her, because she was the strongest. She wasn't tired at all. They complained of the heat; she didn't even feel it . . .

Determindedly, she leaned forward, surveyed the courtroom. She glanced at the judge, at the drooping tipstaff in the corner. Her eyes travelled to the defendant, and then to the table with its pile of State's evidence. Once again, she checked off each article, weighed its significance. The tagged, greasy gun . . . the fingerprint charts which proved nothing . . . the coat. The coat for his wife.

It was a sturdy, coarse-grained wool. She knew fabrics, could appraise their value to the dollar. Thirty-five dollars, retail. Completely styleless, a revolting color. She had always hated fire-engine red . . .

She stared at the coat for a moment, and then, with a sweeping, victorious feeling she couldn't explain, she looked at the defendant's wife. The woman had long, frizzed hair—orange red.

But he wouldn't do that! Her mind closed in on the thought, clamped around it. He wouldn't give a redhead a red coat! Not the defendant—he'd know better than that. Even if he were stealing, even if he were pressed for time, he wouldn't pick a red coat for a redhead. He'd know better—his kind always did. There might be some men who wouldn't know—but not the defendant. He'd know. He'd know, her mind insisted. You could tell by looking at his face, at the fickle, thick-lashed eyes, the quick, jaunty smile. He'd be just the kind who would know about women's clothes, the way he knew about women. She was sure of it. He'd be the kind who would be proud of his taste, arrogant about it. Like Jimmy.

A coat for my wife. Oh, he had been shrewd, the defendant. He had almost convinced her. But the coat hadn't been for his wife at all. The fire-engine red coat had been for some other woman—someone younger, slimmer-waisted, someone blonde . . .

Liar. Liar from beginning to end.

Having made up her mind, Edith Bolton didn't bother to listen to the final words of the prosecutor. She sat back in her chair, feeling light and easy. And not at all bitter, she told herself—not at all like a woman who had received her final divorce decree in the morning mail.

Weapon Wedding — [illegible]en Herrick, 19, a bride of one day, charged that her husband, Francis E. Byers, 29, of Des Moines, Ia., forced her to marry him at gun point. Byers said she eloped with him to Tekamah, Nebr., willingly.

Sitting This One Out—Demonstrating something new in water skiing, Bud Leach, mounted on his favorite chair over a pair of water skis, goes skimming over the water. Bud has promised to try a rocking chair lashed on two sharks for his next demonstration.

JITTER

By Arthur Pointer