

## **Grete Told Me**

By Helen Von Randow (New Zealand)

In Vienna, just before World War II, it was still possible for a Jew to be released if he could provide proof that he was leaving Austria on a certain date. He was released to leave. My friend, Grete, got her husband out of camp and whisked him far, far away. How did she do it? Well, listen.

One morning as she was going to work, she saw a queue straggling a corner. She went up to it and asked, ,

“What are you queueing for?”

“Tickets to China,” was the reply.

“Hold my place,” she answered and ran to a telephone box, spoke to her lawyer and told him to bring all her cash to the queue. After an hour or so he turned up with the notes which she crammed in her purse. By lunchtime Grete had gained the counter. The only accommodation left was A-deck, luxury suites, but that was no problem, she had enough money. Now, armed with the tickets, she must simply get her husband released.

The lawyer gave her on last piece of advice.

“When you go to the SS, you will have to bribe them.”

“Bribe them?”

“Yes, and well.”

“But who?”

“I cannot say – you must decide when you are there.” He turned away his job done.

So Grete was on her way to the SS Headquarters. They had taken over a small town hall in an out of the way suburb. She got off the bus and walked slowly up to the building. Everything was quiet. There was a sign – Business Matters Upstairs. Inside, immediately to the right, was a wide staircase:- white marble, with a dark red centre carpet and black wrought iron balustrade, ofcourse, weddings would have been held upstairs in the old days.

She slowly climbed the elegant stairway, her heart pounding. She felt in her purse. It was all there, passports, tickets and the \$100 note. At the top of the stairs Grete walked

into the main room and up to the desk of a middle-aged man. He looked quite pleasant and listened quietly as she explained her business.

“Oh,” he said, “you have all the necessary papers, come with me.”

Grete followed him diagonally across the hallway into an ante-chamber. Here a dark-headed woman was seated behind a solid desk. Grete stood still. She knew the bribe was getting very close, but surely not to a lady secretary. Indeed the woman was quite dismissive and simply opened a heavy door and ushered Grete into a room, a room flooded with light. Another door opened and the SS officer came in. In the bright sunlight his uniform shone black. A black of such intensity that Grete blinked. The fine material, the silver buttons. The sleek pretentiousness of it all, cuffs, lapels, epaulettes. Now she knew. As they took their seats one each side of the empty desk Grete slipped the banknote into the back of one of the passports.

The man looked across at her.

“You have the necessary papers, madam?”

Grete did not speak, but handed them over. He studied them one by one, then returned them.

Thank you, all is in order.”

She stood up and silently left the room.

Not until she was halfway down the stairs did she dare look at the passports. The money was gone. Grete floated down the remaining stairs as happy as a bride. She never doubted that her husband would be set free and, indeed, they were to arrive on the Shanghai Railway Station, penniless and hungry, but that is another story.