



Writers and words

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THE LEONARDO ROSE

A work of fiction that imagines an unlikely romance that bloomed in occupied Poland during WWII...



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The insistent rapping on the church door awakened Stras. Disoriented, he rubbed sleep from his eyes and picked up the clock off the night table. Four-thirty a.m. He had not overslept.

Grumpily, he put on his robe and shuffled to the front door. "The church is closed! Please return after seven, and may the love of Jesus be with you," he said loudly, trying to sound welcoming despite his annoyance.

The rapping became more urgent, and was accompanied by a shrill outcry.

"Please let me in! They're following me!"

Stras was about to reply dismissively again, but detected mounting fear in the outcries. He uttered a sigh and turned the key on the inside lock, opening the door just a few inches. "What is..." he began formulating a question, but the image of the visitor made words dry out in his mouth.

It was a very young woman, nearly a child. Her skin was quite dark and her straight hair shot wildly in all directions. She was dressed in filthy rags and was clutching her stomach as if in pain. The expression in her face was one of supreme terror.

Stras opened the door wide and she rushed in past him. He closed the door and faced the girl, who was standing in the nave, trembling and breathing in big gulps of air.

"Are you hurt?" he asked

"Not much. Only my feet. I'm just out of breath."

Stras looked at the girl's feet, which were bare, black with dirt, and bleeding profusely. He feared the blood would make a mess that would take him a long time to clear. "There, sit down on that last pew. I'll bring something for your feet."

He led her to a seat and headed for the cupboard in the sacristy where he kept the mop and the pail of water. He seized those plus a couple of towels and returned to the girl, who was sitting and had calmed down somewhat.

He knelt before her, swabbing repeatedly with a wet rag to remove the dirt and congealed blood, and drying her still bleeding feet with a clean towel. This was a familiar routine, which he performed every year on Good Thursday assisting Father Bogdan when the aging priest still could see. Later on, as near total blindness set in, Stras performed the ceremony all by himself while the priest intoned the appropriate prayers.

“What’s your name?” Stras asked as he worked.

“Shelta,” replied the girl in a shy whisper.

“Are you *Zydowski*?” He needed to know this at once to figure out what to do. Sheltering Jews was a serious crime that could land him in jail or worse.

“No, *Cyganka*.” Stras frowned. Gypsies were just as unwelcome as Jews to the eyes of the German occupiers.

“Where are you from?”

“I live in a Gypsy camp near Jurowce, less than ten kilometers from here.”

“So, what are you doing in Bialystok?”

“German troops raided our camp last night. I was out fetching kindling for the stove and was missed when they rounded everyone up. I began running away the moment I heard the cries, for I know what they do with us.” She shuddered and started crying.

“And you ran all the way here?”

“I kept hearing dogs barking, coming closer, so I dared not stop. I was about to drop from exhaustion, and then I saw this building that seemed like a church. Please help me!”

Stras finished cleaning her feet and rose. “Let me see if I can find Father Bogdan’s old sandals. I’ll be right back.” He needed time to think about this.

Eastern Poland was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939 and became part of the Belarusian Socialist Soviet Republic until Germany launched its 1941 attack on the Soviet Union. Bialystok and its Catholic churches had therefore escaped

the Nazi's brutal suppression of Catholicism in the parts of Poland that Germany occupied at the outbreak of the war. But now it was 1942, the second year of German occupation, and all Catholic churches in Poland were at risk, including *his* church: The Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which was the jewel of Catholic faith in Eastern Poland. Discovery of a gypsy seeking sanctuary in the premises would land him and Father Bogdan in jail and could give the Nazis an excuse to demolish the neo-Gothic cathedral. That would be a tragedy worse than their imprisonment.

Shelta had cried herself to sleep, her head resting on the back of the seat in front of hers. Stras tapped her gently on the shoulder. "Please wake up. We need to talk."

She was instantly alert, her eyes round with fear. "Are you going to throw me out? Please don't throw me out."

"No, no. Calm down. Nobody is going to throw you out." He thought this might be a lie, but she needed to keep a cool head so that she and everyone else remained safe. "First thing, do you have any relatives or friends who can offer you shelter?"

"Everyone I know was in that camp. They were all taken away." She began crying again, remembering the events of the night before.

"Now, think for a moment," he continued. "Do you think the Germans saw you head in this direction?"

"I don't know."

"Apart from the Germans, did anyone see you come in this direction?"

"I don't think so. The town was deserted."

"Well, you are probably in no danger for the moment. But we have to start taking protective measures."

"Like what?"

"For starters, go to the lavatory and clean yourself thoroughly. I'll give you a coat to wear."

Urszula Kaczmarek ran a boarding house across the square from the Cathedral. Early in the morning, Stras paid her a call. They sat together in the parlor, enjoying a cup of tea.

“*Szanowna Pani Kaczmarek*, how are you this morning?”

“Dear Deacon,” answered Mrs. Kaczmarek, “what a surprise. How can I assist you?”

“I need your help with a delicate matter. Can I count on your assistance?”

“Of course, Stras. Anything to help our Holy Church.” Mrs. Kaczmarek kneaded her hands in anticipation of a potential piece of gossip.

“A relative of Father Bogdan arrived unexpectedly last night from the south. Her train ran into fighting along the way and all her luggage was lost. We desperately need to get her some clothes, but it is not becoming of Church officials to go around buying female garments. Do you happen to know how I could discreetly get a change of clothes or two for the poor girl?”

“Well, you came to the right place. I have some clothes that my Aniela left behind when she moved to Warsaw. What size is your guest?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Not too tall. Average size, slim. Don’t worry too much about fitting, we can see to that later.”

“Fine. Does she need shoes, too?”

“Oh, yes, please!”

“Wait just a second.” Mrs. Kaczmarek rose, placed the teacup on the table, and walked swiftly back into the living area of the house. Ten minutes later she returned, dresses, blouses, skirts and shoes dangling precariously from her arms. “This is all I could find right now, but if you come back this afternoon I’ll have more.”

Stras got up and hastened to relieve Mrs. Kaczmarek of her burden. “Thank you so much, my dear lady. Father Bogdan will be most appreciative.”

Some of the clothes were too large on Shelta, others too tight, but she managed to put a passable outfit together: a white blouse with short puffy sleeves, and a sleek gray skirt that went below her knees. The shoes were too large for her feet and she had to insert pieces of cardboard in them, but after some practice she could walk almost normally.

Stras' first look at the clean, well dressed Shelta was a revelation. She was quite pretty and had a seductive youthful air. "How do I look?" she preened, forgetting her woes for a moment.

"Amazing," responded Stras, mesmerized. "No one would believe that you..." he was about to say "used to live in a wagon" but ended the sentence with "just ran away from the Nazis."

There was a commotion from the entrance to the church, followed by loud voices and canine barks and growls. "Who is in charge here?" asked a heavily accented voice in Polish.

Father Bogdan was emerging out of the rectory and was faced by three large men in gray-green uniforms wearing SS insignia. One of them barked at the priest: "You?"

Stras quickly intervened: "With respect, Sir, I am the Deacon, and am the person actually in charge. Father Bogdan is in ill health."

The SS officer turned to Stras: "We are looking for several escaped Roma who lived in wagons around the city. Have you seen any of them?"

Stras tried to hold his wits together. "Of course not. This is a *Catholic Church*. What business would we have with gypsies?"

"We'll see to that," replied the German angrily. "We'll do a search of this place and if we find anybody hiding here, we'll take him, and you as well, Papists."

Shelta then came out from behind Stras. She had turned so pale that her face was the color of butter cream. She advanced towards the officers, apparently about to make a full confession.

Stras grabbed her by the arm, turned her towards him and announced, "This is Zosia, my wife," as he planted a quick kiss on her cheek.

The SS officer gave him an incredulous stare. "You, married to a pretty girl who could be your daughter?"

Father Bogdan then spoke with a surprisingly strong voice: "They are indeed man and wife. I married them myself."

The SS officer was taken slightly aback, but persisted. "Can I see her papers?"

Father Bogdan responded nonchalantly. "I can do better. I can show you their marriage license. I would just have to dig it out of our records."

Another German officer then cut in. "Quit it, Hans. We are wasting time. She doesn't even look like a Gypsy to me. And look at that dress."

The first officer was about to protest but thought better of it. "We'll be back," he threatened, but turned around and left, followed by the others.

Shelta embraced Stras. "You saved my life!!!"

Stras was embarrassed but the girl's intimate touch sparked pleasurable sensations from deep inside him. With an effort, he let her go and responded. "Shelta, you also have to thank Father Bogdan. He saved us both."

The priest replied, "I had wanted to get this girl out of here for her good, and ours. But there is nothing to be done now. Shelta, welcome to our household."

Shelta became a guest of the Bialystok Cathedral, and proved to be a welcome addition to the church's staff. Father Bogdan had needed to remain in service at Bialystok though he would have wanted to retire for several years now. He could barely manage his pastoral duties and was unable to do much else.

Stras was in his thirties and rather vigorous, but the Cathedral was vast and included an adjacent parish church built in the late Renaissance. Thus, he was always working hard on something or another. Little by little, Shelta assumed many duties that had been performed by Stras or hired out to people in the community. She did everything willingly, but with an air of melancholy that she could not manage to hide.

She and Stras often worked separately, but had a number of things in common. Shelta was pretty much illiterate, and Stras would read aloud to her passages of

the works of the great Polish Romantic writers. The Deacon was a passable organist and took it upon himself to teach Shelta the rudiments of playing the organ ("one of the finest in all of Poland," he used to brag). In a matter of months, they were playing duets during the services, and the parishioners came to appreciate how much more beautiful sounded the pieces by Bach and Buxtehude now that Stras had a partner.

Another thing they did together was working on the garden behind the Cathedral. Stras had given a utilitarian use to the garden, planting vegetables and herbs for the table. Shelta appropriated for herself a corner to plant flowers. In particular, she planted roses of several Antique varieties, but these did not do well. They bloomed only sporadically and were plagued by aphids and other pests. Her favorite, and the source of her greatest frustration, was a Leonardo da Vinci Gallica, which could give beautiful round pink blooms, but very seldom did.

Stras was helping Shelta to spray bug killers on the Leonardo when she turned to him and asked, "Why do they call you Stras? That is not your real name, is it?"

Stras blushed as pink as the Leonardo blooms. "Stras is short for *Straszny*, a common name for "horrible." My real name is Tadeusz, but when I was a child other kids took to calling me "horrible" and the name stuck. I'm used to it.

Shelta took a close look at her friend. Yes, Stras was not handsome. Maybe plain, but not ugly. She had never thought of him as a physical specimen, and while certainly not attracted to his body, she had a deep appreciation for the man, a mixture of gratitude and affection.

For his part, Stras became more infatuated with Shelta each passing day, but never thought of marrying her. She was still in mourning and Stras feared that she would have rejected him.

The months went on and Shelta's stay at the Cathedral extended into 1944. In late July of that year, retreating German armies sacked and destroyed the center of the city, and a few days later invading Russian troops further tore the town down. The Cathedral miraculously survived the carnage, but it was clear that the days of German occupation were over and the direct threats to Jews and Gypsies in that part of Poland had ended.

On a warm afternoon in mid-August Shelta and Stras sat on small chairs in the garden behind the Cathedral, talking about the future.

“So, what are you going to do now that you are no longer in fear for your life?” asked Stras.

Shelta was evasive. “I don’t know, my life was cut in half over a year ago and I don’t know yet how to put it together.”

A few days later, having gathered her few possessions, Shelta confronted Stras and Father Bogdan with her plans: “This town is destroyed and there are no *Cyganka* left, so I best leave. I’m moving south to Lublin. I believe there are some of my people down there.”

“Go with our blessings, child. May you find happiness and peace wherever you go,” Father Bogdan said.

Stras, his face set in a rigid mask, embraced Shelta and kissed her on both cheeks. “Be well. I’ll always remember you.” *More than remember*, he thought to himself.

The following morning, Shelta climbed onto an ox-driven cart and began her laborious journey towards a new life.

“Gratitude will only get you that far,” lamented Stras.

It was near the end of winter. It was also the end of five years of a brutal war in which the lives of many and the illusions of millions had been lost.

Stras was starting spring planting; he was trying to turn the still half frozen soil with a hoe when the sound of an approaching car drew his attention. He went around to the front of the Cathedral, arriving just in time to see the passenger door of a car open and watch as a young woman in modern clothes emerge from the vehicle.

His jaw dropped. It was Shelta, looking slightly more mature but otherwise unchanged. She greeted him with a broad smile and flung herself into his arms.

“What are you doing here?” asked Stras, gulping down his emotion.

“I have seen how others live. I have met my people again, and they don’t feel like I belong with them anymore. I now realize that the almost two years I spent here were the happiest period of my life. I want to feel that way again.”

“Well, you are welcome to join us,” offered Stras, a little stiffly.

Shelta went on. “I also realized that my feelings for you are stronger than I credited. It was not only gratitude that drew me to you. You are the kindest man I’ve ever known. In fact, I want to live with you the rest of my life, not just as a guest, but as your companion.”

Stras remained silent. Shelta went on, lamely. “Did I misunderstand how you feel? Shall I leave again?”

Stras held both her hands in his, and at last managed to speak. “No, you must stay. I’ve loved you since the day you came knocking at our door seeking refuge. I’m just so shaken by my good fortune that I don’t know where to begin. But let’s do this. Bring your things in and join me in the back garden. It’s time to prune that pink Leonardo rose and see if we can get it to bloom this blessed spring.”

They sealed their reunion with a tender kiss and set to work together in the garden. And, as if to bear witness to their love, the Leonardo began blooming in May and gifted them with beautiful blossoms until the first snows fell in October.

From then on, they had good days and bad days, like all people in love do. “I hate you” she would sometimes say. And later she would add, “But I love you still.” And so, it always went.

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over ninety of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, “The Satchel and Other Terrors” is scheduled for release in February 2023.