

SMILE

Kateřina Barancov

There was a light in old Mrs Schmidt's living room. She was never switching it off. The terrors she's been through in the World War II make her be wary and distrustful. Her senses have faded, so every day a young man Peter is coming to check her out.

Peter Wells has never liked retirees. He thinks that they are slow and boring and this doesn't go along with these days. He found this job only because of the amount of money he was getting with it. But after he found out that Mrs Schmidt isn't just an ordinary old woman, he started to like visiting her. Although, he never wanted to admit that he always came for the interesting stories from the war she was telling him.

"How was your day today, Miss Schmidt?" Peter asked. He knew that she's going to answer with the sentence that she always used to. He was asking mainly for decency's sake. Today he wanted to do an interview with her for the newspaper where he's been working for past half a year, but he wasn't sure if the old woman wouldn't mind.

"Shitty, Peter, shitty," she replied and wrinkles appeared around her ice blue eyes. She gave him a little smirk, but it disappeared just as fast as it appeared.

The student looked around the small living room. There was a small kitchen connected to the drawing room, so Peter didn't have to go far away from Mrs Schmidt. He started to brew the tea and set some cookies, that he bought in small shop in Linden Street, on a small plate with flower pattern. "Would you mind if I ask you a few questions?" he asked hesitantly.

The old woman yanked her head. First she uncertainly looked at Peter, then back again at her hands in which she was holding a magazine with crosswords. After a while, she shook her head as a sign of approval. Peter felt like he had a load off his mind. With a plate in hands he jumped into a yellow armchair opposite Mrs Schmidt, put the plate on a glass coffee table and waited impatiently for the kettle's whistle.

“What do you want to talk about, Peter?” asked Mrs Schmidt curiously. There was a doubt in her voice. She shoved her gray hair, which used to be platinum blonde, behind her ears so they didn’t fall into her face.

“Well, I was wondering if you would mind if I did an interview with you,” he said. “You know, I write for this magazine and I think that a lot of people would find your stories interesting. Everyone should know that this has actually happened,” he tried to convince her and smiled. The woman looked doubtful. Every time she thought about war she had nausea and even after those seventy years living in a relatively safe country the panic absorbs her. She realized that she doesn’t have much more time, so she overcame her fear. “Sure, why not.”

Peter was staring at her like she was made of gold. He couldn’t believe that she actually said yes. He didn’t want to lose any time and started with the first question; “You were imprisoned in a concentration camp. How did you feel like to be there and how did you get in?”

The old lady was thinking for a while. “I was transferred from Dresden into the concentration camp on the fourth of September 1943. I was thirteen. Our family was hiding a Jewish family of my friend Marlene in basement and when the SS men were searching through our house, they found them. They immediately killed my mom by shooting her and my dad has died in war, so I had no one left. I didn’t rely on living more than a few weeks, but as you can see, I made it. I was transferred by a train full of people into Auschwitz. We were travelling for two days and some died right in front of my eyes – in the train. Those who were weak got killed on the footway into the camp.”

For a while, Peter waited with the next question, because he saw that Mrs Schmidt is quite upset. As she was talking, he brought her some tea and opened the window, so some fresh air could get in the room.

After some time he brought up the next question.

“What’s the most horrible memory from Auschwitz that you can think of?” He wasn’t so confident about this question, he wasn’t sure about how would Mrs Schmidt react. But he had to ask, not only for his curiosity.

The woman was deep in her thoughts. Peter could see the angst and sadness in her eyes, while the horrible memories were flying through her head. After a few minutes of thinking, she broke the silence: "It was winter at the time. The second winter in Auschwitz I experienced. My boots started to tear apart and I had really, really cold feet, from which I could get some illness and die soon. I remember that I was already alone. Marlene died from pneumonia few months ago. Her father – Mr Hertz – has died in the gas chamber right when we got in Auschwitz and Mrs Hertz lived on the other side of the camp, so I can't even remember when it came for her. The women from my barrack weren't talking to me much and Miss Anna, which I was regularly meeting, was probably at work." Then she stopped for a second.

"Somehow, a chocolate came to my hands. I don't remember how I got it. Maybe I stole it, whatever. But God, I was so happy. I didn't want to eat it myself, so I waited for Miss Anna to give her a bite. She always gave me a bite of her food," said Mrs Schmidt. "Around noon, when I had a duty in the kitchen, some small gipsy girl came over. She seemed to be lost. Her hair was sticking onto her face and as she was spinning around and looking for her mother, she fell down and stayed sitting on the ground. I knew that I shouldn't do so, but I came to her and tried to help her.

"Are you looking for someone?" I asked. "My mum," she answered. "She got lost somewhere and I've been looking for her since yesterday." I knew that she won't ever see her mother again so I tried to comfort her. I took her out and sat with her for a while, looking at a buzzing fence. She told me that her name is Maria and she is also from Dresden and is four years old. She also told me that when she grows up, she's going to be an artist. I wanted to cry and scream at the same time. I wanted to tell these SS men that we're going to defeat them all and they must going to pay for this horror. I knew that this world is bullshit, everything that happens is bullshit and all these people are corrupt, rotten and evil."

For a while, they were sitting in silence. A quiet sob of Mrs Schmidt sounded through the room.

"I gave her the chocolate," she said after a moment. "Everytime I think about how alertly I was gazing around hoped that nobody sees this, I have a feeling that somebody is watching me. I unwrapped the chocolate and its smell punched me right into my face. Peter, you can't even imagine how mouth-watering feeling it was. When I offered it to Maria, she was shocked. "That's chocolate?" she asked. She had never eaten it. She had never seen it. She didn't know the smell of it. I gave it to her

and she bit it. She chewed it up thoroughly and smiled. Her eyes changed into stars and you could almost touch the happiness. Boy, I can tell you that I've never seen a more beautiful smile in my life. She was smiling. There, in Auschwitz. And I was smiling with her. And for a moment I forgot where I was. For a minute I hoped that there was something good in the world. To make a person smile can change the world. Maybe not the whole world, but at least you can change someone's life."