

Maria A. Keywan, "September – Month of Joy and Sorrow," *Zhinochyi Svit*, September 1993.

(Dedicated to the memory of my late husband Ivan)

September has long been my favourite month. The summer heat is over and the sun's gentle warmth flows down from the placid sky. The green trees are tinged here and there with gold and crimson. The cobwebs, emblems of Indian summer, float through the air, wrapping human hearts in vague feelings of nostalgia. High above fly flocks of migrating birds. In the expressions of the people who watch them in their flight hangs an unspoken question: "Why is there no isle of bliss¹ for human beings?"

This year in September, we would have celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary. We got married in the Kolomea church at noon on a warm and sunny day, September 14, 1943. The wedding was a modest affair, as was fitting in wartime. When we were coming out of the church, a flock of migrating birds flew overhead. "We are leaving our homeland," I thought, and immediately corrected myself, "They are leaving; we're not leaving."

Two days after our wedding was Ivan's birthday and so September became for us a doubly special month. Wherever we were to find ourselves in mid-September, in our thoughts and conversations, we were always back in our homeland on the day of our wedding. In the church, with the birds above it... And I was not mistaken in thinking "we are leaving" instead of "they are leaving," because already, on our first wedding anniversary, we were marking the day on foreign soil. In spring 1944, when the birds were returning from their wintering grounds, we had to leave our town, our parents and families and soon afterward, our homeland. After several months of wandering through the Carpathian Mountains and a long stop during the summer beside the Hornád River near Košice (Slovakia), we, along with the other refugees camped there, were put into freight cars and shipped westward. The journey was long and difficult, with frequent alarms, flights of bombers overhead and transfers. We did not know where we were being taken and whether we would get there alive. Finally, we arrived at Strasshof, where a refugee camp had been set up, and most of the passengers remained there. We went further, to Hanover, and were placed there in a camp near the city. This is where we marked our first wedding anniversary. The situation at the front was almost hopeless and we, as refugees, asked ourselves fearfully: if we survive the war, what will happen to us after the Germans' loss? The bombers were flying over the city with increasing frequency, although, fortunately, our small barracks in the woods were missed by the bombs. But who knew what would come tomorrow and on our wedding anniversary we said, "Thank God, we are still together." Every year in September, we repeated this phrase.

But the autumn in northern Germany was beautiful. We had never before seen colours as rich and warm as these. Ivan was sorry that he didn't have any paints or brushes. He only had pencils, with which he executed several portraits of other inhabitants of the camp, including Senator Olena Kysilevska, as well as a portrait of me.

In May of the following year, the war ended and although this put a stop to the bombing, it did not end our fears. What awaited us? Marienbad in the Sudetenland, where we were living at the end of the war and where our son Orest was born (I was working there in a hospital for Germans from Ukraine, who often could not speak a word of German) was first entered by the Americans, who soon left. In their place, came the Red Army,

¹ In Slavic mythology, migratory birds spend the winter months on a paradise-like island.

to the joy of the Czechs, but not our joy. We managed to leave with the Americans for Bavaria. In September 1945, we were already in the DP (displaced persons) camp in the Bavarian Alps. And there, our situation was still not certain, as Soviet commissars travelled through the camps, trying to persuade people to return voluntarily to the "Motherland." There were no volunteers and the Soviets often grabbed people by force, sometimes – unfortunately – with help from the Americans. Rumours circulated that everyone was going to be handed over to the Soviets. On our second wedding anniversary, we again said to each other, "It's good that we are still together."

Our fate was not decided quickly; we spent another four Septembers in the Alps, in the DP camps. Every year in September, in our thoughts and conversations, we were back home, always thankful to the fates that we were still together. For the longest period, more than three years, we lived in military barracks near the town of Mittenwald, on the Isar River, where our daughter Zonia was born. As elsewhere, here too, September was for us the most beautiful time of the year, although the beauty of the Alps was very different from the beauty of northern Germany. Ivan was now able to buy paints and brushes and he produced a whole series of Alpine landscapes, as well as several portraits, including one of T. Osmachka, probably the only portrait of the poet.

From 1950, we celebrated our Septembers in Canada, with no more fears that we would be separated. We faced other problems, some of which were common to all immigrants, others specific to artists – how to divide one's time between work for daily bread and artistic endeavours. To some extent, Ivan succeeded at this, as is evident from his portrait of Mazepa, which is now very popular in Ukraine, numerous portraits of Shevchenko, self-portrait, portrait of the poet Lesych and other works, as well as many commemorative documents for Ukrainian organizations and book covers, including those for my two novels.

At that time, the Ukrainian *diaspora* had little interest in art; there was a need to popularize it. Ivan took this duty onto himself. In addition to countless articles on art for the press, he wrote several monographs. The longest of these was *Taras Shevchenko, the Artist*, published by KUK (Ukrainian Canadian Committee) in 1964, which also earned him the Shevchenko medal. Ivan believed very strongly that there was a need for an undistorted history of Ukrainian art to offset the claims of Soviet publications. Should he take on this task? He knew that it would require a colossal amount of work and leave less time for artistic self-expression. After a long internal conflict – to paint or to write? – he chose the latter.

The years passed and imperceptibly came old age, and with it, ill health. Ivan's destiny included many illnesses, as well as a serious disability – deafness. On more than one occasion we marked our wedding anniversary in a hospital and the phrase, "It's good that we are still together" took on new meaning, as once again, we were threatened with separation.

September 1991 was different from the previous ones; it was happier. When, as we did every year, we recalled our marriage in Ukraine, we saw a different Ukraine – free and filled with blue and yellow flags. However, the next anniversary, our 49th, found Ivan in the hospital, where I had taken him a few days earlier (he had a stroke). He didn't like hospitals and every day he asked me to take him home. He didn't know that this was impossible; I was told that he would need constant care, more than one person would be able to manage.

My brother Adrian arrived and on September 17 and we went to the hospital together. Ivan seemed improved; he was livelier.

"You don't look sick," said Adrian in greeting.

"You came for my funeral," was the reply.

Adrian left and I stayed to give Ivan his dinner. He ate with more appetite than usual and didn't speak of death again. He said it was good that my brother was here, that I wasn't alone at home, and the impression left by the earlier talk of a funeral faded.

The next day, in the morning, there was a telephone call from the hospital. A nurse informed me that the patient's health had deteriorated. Could I come? A few minutes later, another call, from a doctor. It was all over.

We came to the hospital. He was sleeping, with such a calm, mild expression on his face – truly, there was “neither pain, nor sorrow.” I touched his forehead, face, hands – they were still warm. I kissed his face, his forehead. Was he really dead? I knew it, but didn't believe it.

They give me his things and we went home. It was good that I wasn't alone. I had to inform the parish, the children, the family in Ukraine, our closest friends. I had to choose the time of the funeral, so that everyone would be able to come. The news travelled across the city: there were phone calls, visits, the noise of life in contrast to the stillness of death. If he really was dead, if this wasn't a dream, from which I would shortly wake up...

During the night, the events of the day replayed in my mind. Again I saw that calm face, I felt the touch of my hand on his forehead. What was his last thought under that warm forehead? What was he dreaming before he died, since he died in his sleep? Did he see his whole life, as though in a film? If yes, then how did he see me and the children, as he looked at us before crossing to the other side? Who came to meet him as he passed through the tunnel described by people who return from the threshold of death? Probably his mother, whom he often spoke about, who understood him from a single glance. Or maybe that figure bathed in supernatural light whom some who return say they have seen. The late Ivan was a deeply believing Christian.

Or maybe he saw in his dreams his history of art as a completed, published book. Maybe he saw his imagined but never executed paintings, among them, one of Markura from Osmachka's novel *Starshyi boyaryn*. Somehow, I believe that when the film of his life played before him, its central image was of the church in Kolomea on our wedding day, with the flock of birds above it that foretold our departure from our homeland, and that shining in front of him he saw Ukraine, independent and sovereign.

This year in September I will no longer say “It's good that we are still together.” To the two previous dates – September 14 and 16, I now have had to add a third – September 18, the sad date of our separation.