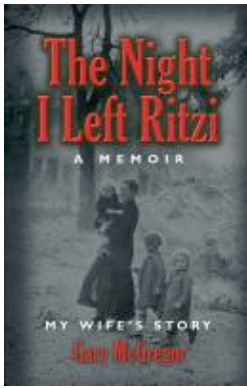


# The Night I Left Ritzi

A MEMOIR

MY WIFE'S STORY

Gary McGregor



*This is the story of a young girl who was forced to flee during World War II along with her wealthy family from her ancestral home and her idyllic life, leaving everything behind, including her beloved pet goat "Ritzi." That young girl became the author's wife. This story relates her experiences during that calamitous and frightening time, her subsequent immigration to the United States with family, settling in Ohio, and later living in south Mississippi.*

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# **THE NIGHT I LEFT RITZI**

**James Gary McGregor**

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First Edition

*For our children  
Michael, Chris, Monica, and Jeff*

## *World War II Begins*

I was only three years old when Hitler annexed Austria (the Anschluss).

In the spring of 1939 Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, then in the summer of the same year, crossed the border into Poland. World War II had begun in earnest.

War was declared by England and France in September. The German army marched into Paris in the following year, 1940.

My concerned parents listened to the news every day, but we were kept from hearing all this war news. We only heard Mutti and Vati talking sometimes when we were not supposed to. My childhood at this time was still unchanged; normal and happy. Everyone around me saw to that. Sometimes Mutti would let us crawl into bed with her. We would snuggle between her and Vati while she read stories for us. I will always treasure that time that we spent in bed with them.

History records that Hitler received Prince Paul of Yugoslavia in March of 1941 at Berchtesgaden in secret, and asked him to allow German troops to pass through Yugoslav territory on their march into Greece. In exchange, Yugoslavia would be given part of Greek Macedonia, and other parts of that country. This essentially was an ultimatum because he gave the Yugoslavian government only five days to decide about the demands made on March 4<sup>th</sup>.

On the morning of April 6, 1941 the German army invaded Yugoslavia.

My mother and father were afraid there would be fighting between the Germans, and the communist partisans of Marshall Tito. That army of partisans was still small in 1941, but was gathering strength, as many young men and women of Serbia and Croatia were joining Tito's forces in a frenzy of patriotism.

Even though my family had been in Yugoslavia for more than 200 years, we were still Germans, and therefore the enemy. I think there was a great deal of resentment among the Serbian peoples because we as a group were the largest land owners, and had amassed much of the wealth of the country.

It was arranged that Mutti would take the three of us (Werner had not yet been born) across the Romanian border which was only a few miles away for a few days to stay with friends. I think that it was in the city of Timisoara. Vati would stay in Kikinda to watch over the house and mill.

The Germans were advancing from Hungary in the north. I'm sure that my parents were counting on the army moving into Kikinda quickly because we would then be safe, and that is exactly what happened.

I don't remember how long we stayed in Romania, but I think it was only a few days. I do remember sleeping in a bed with other children, some at the head of the bed, others at the foot. I was glad to come home to my Ritzi.

After the German army set up their government in our small town, things settled down in an orderly routine, especially for us, because although we were Yugoslavian citizens, we were German nationals, and quickly entered into this new way. We were relieved that we didn't have to worry anymore about Tito's partisan army. I felt safe for now.

On my birthday in August of 1941 I became six years old, and Mutti had a party for me, and some of my school friends. Ritzi was the star of the party.

For the next three years, things went smoothly despite being an occupied town. I had started school in the fall. It was a private school, and we were taught in German. Only children of German ancestry were enrolled there. That's just the way it was at the time. The Serbians had their own school. But there was one incident that disturbed, and scared me. I had gone riding in a

carriage with Mutti, and as we turned onto the main street of Kikinda, she suddenly said,

“Cover your eyes and keep them covered until I tell you.”

Of course, that was like telling me not to put a marble in my mouth or a bean in my nostril. I looked between my fingers. There were people hanging by the neck from wooden scaffolding lining the street. Their heads hung at odd angles on their shoulders. That frightened me, and I closed my eyes. I didn't know who they were at the time, and why this had happened to them, but now when I think back, they must have been Tito's partisans. When I got home that day, I gave Ritzi a big hug, and we played together all afternoon. The sight of those unfortunate people remained with me for a long time. Mutti had been very upset also.

It was during this time of occupation that Vati was conscripted into the German army. It was in the summer of 1942. I know he was very worried about leaving us, and about the mill. I had overheard my mother and father quietly talking about that. However we had good employees in the mill office. He trusted them to take care of things, and he was able to come home periodically, and called home often. He was stationed not too far away in Belgrade as adjutant to an officer who was in charge of supplies, and a store like a PX exchange. That man's name was Captain Schauffler. He and my father were good friends, and had been hunting buddies before the war. He had visited our home here in Kikinda many times. There was no fighting in Belgrade at that time.

During one of Vati's trips home, my mother arranged a festive party, I guess to take everyone's thoughts away from war for a short while.

Tables were set up in the garden for the food, and there were crowds of people there. Many of the men were in uniform including the two young officers that were now living in the

guest rooms of our home. They were tall, thin, blonde, and friendly. Trude and I thought they were very handsome. Our nanny kept us in tow, but the party was an exciting interlude for me, considering all the gloomy war talk I was hearing.

A short while later the army commandeered our cars. I guess they needed them more than we did. I don't think that it bothered us very much. Kikinda was a small town, and we had a carriage, and the horses to pull it. In winter we usually had lots of snow, and those same horses were used to draw a beautiful sleigh. That was great fun for me. I'll take sleighs over cars any day. I had my bicycle that nanny had taught me to ride, and I had my Ritzi. I rode everywhere on my bicycle, even to school. Ritzi followed me one day, and had to be picked up and returned home.

We were told that we were required to obtain an "Annenpas". This was a small record book about the size of a passport. It contained information about ones ancestry. This was an unholy requirement by Hitler's government to prove that we didn't have any Jewish blood in our background. In this little book were documentations gathered from church records, birth certificates, court house papers, etc. All this was obtained from villages and towns in the region. Everyone in our family had one. The earliest date in my Annenpas is 1792; probably one of my very, very great grandfathers. There is a swastika printed on the front of the little book. I still have it --- a sad reminder of the horrors of Hitler's obsession and its finality.

The year of '43 passed without much happening except for the birth of my youngest brother, Werner. Now we were a family of six. I was eight years old and already thinking I might like to be an animal doctor when I grew up.

The war was beginning to heat up in the Balkans. Conversation at home was frequently of war, and not without some apprehension. I sensed a change in Kikinda. There seemed

to be more soldiers on the streets, and we heard that people were leaving for other places, using whatever transportation they could find. However, there was no talk of us leaving at this time that I remember.

Mutti tried to protect us from hearing most of the war news, and I was busy playing with my new baby brother, and of course, my little goat Ritzi.

Except for the one time that we went to stay with friends in Romania, I had been at home, not thinking much about the war, believing like most other children in the world that our parents would take care of everything, and that my life would be as happy as it always had been. Vati was still in Belgrade. I imagine he had many discussions with Mutti about what to do as the war grew closer but for now things were still normal for me and my siblings.

I loved the big wagons pulled by horses that farmers used to haul the wheat to the mill, to be ground into flour.

Vati would complain, "Renate, you are too many times underfoot, you need to stay out of the way."

It was fun watching them unload, and all the farmers knew me.

Behind the mill were the stables where my father housed the horses used to deliver flour locally, and also to the train station for shipping. These were the same horses that were hitched to our carriage when we needed to go some place.

Cows were kept for milk, cheese and cream, and even pigs were kept for meat. These were all housed behind the mill. This was my favorite place to be, watching the cows being milked, and the horses being groomed. I had names for all of them. A large number of families had a cow and a horse. Those cows were so smart that every evening, if they had been grazing in the fields just outside of town, they came strolling down the streets, and entered the gates of their respective owners. If those gates

were still closed, they stood and waited for the owner to open them. I liked watching them, and hearing the bells they wore around their necks make symphonies in the late afternoon.

I begged and begged Vati for a pony. If we had been able to stay at home, I know he would have given me one. He had a German Short Hair hunting dog named Fritz. I never knew why he had given her a boy's name. I remember when she gave birth to fourteen puppies. I couldn't wait to hold those cuddly pups, and we all had fun playing with them.

After Vati was drafted into the army, he took Fritz with him wherever he was stationed. Somehow she became lost during the war, and he never saw her again. I'm sure that was sad for him.

Someday, I thought, I'll have a horse, a pony, and a dog all my own to care for, but for now I had my Ritzi, and she was enough. And someday I would definitely become an animal doctor, I thought.

I still felt no insecurity despite the constant talk of war. Vati came home for a visit. We were so glad to see him. His presence increased my feeling of safety. However, I suspect it had become increasingly obvious to Mutti and Vati that we would have to leave our home for a while.

Meanwhile the Russians were moving steadily from the East. I think my parents thought that we would be able to return when the fighting was over. They were very worried, of course, about our safety, and also about the mill and our house.

The officer in command of the German soldiers had been instructed not to make a stand there in Kikinda, but to move the army further west. That meant that we could possibly be taken as prisoners by the Russians, or at the worst, killed by the partisans. But of course I knew nothing of this at the time.

Many entire families and other people of German ancestry had already left town. Their cars, like ours, had been taken away by the army. They left in horse drawn wagons filled with their

possessions, or on foot, pushing small carts heading northwest into Hungary.

Vati had been ordered back to Belgrade, and I'm sure he was very worried about us, the mill, and our home, but mostly about us. We had heard Mutti and Vati talking after we were supposed to be in bed. I understood that it was a very serious situation but I knew that they would protect us at all cost. I wasn't too worried at this time.

Ritzi became my constant companion, and I think Mutti encouraged that. It kept small minds from dwelling too much on frightening things. My sister and brothers and I were encouraged by our governess to keep busy with our toys. She was a young Serbian girl, and was always thinking up new games for us to play. Despite the fact, I imagine, of also being frightened, and apprehensive of when and what was going to happen.



## *Flight*

Things became chaotic at home. Mutti was very busy preparing for us to leave. Our scared nanny tried to keep us occupied, and out of the way. Mutti, arranged for a trusted employee of the mill to bury all of the large silver serving pieces in the back yard. The remaining silver along with other valuables was hidden behind a new wall under the stairway in the house. Mutti packed some of her beautiful linens, many of which had been made for her trousseau or embroidered especially for the new house.

Because we didn't have a car, Vati, with the help of Captain Schaufler had made plans for us to leave on a troop train with the retreating army; one of the last trains to leave Kikinda. I'm sure he wanted to be here with us, but I guess it was impossible at the time.

Vati's youngest brother's wife, my aunt Emmi, and their children would be leaving on the train with us. They had two girls; Erica and baby Christi, my cousins.

The memory that is most vivid for me about that confused time, was Mutti on the phone, just before we left, trying to persuade her father, who lived in the nearby town of Heufeld, to go with us.

"You must come with us," she said, tearfully, "The Russians or the partisans might kill you!"

"I'm not going to leave my land, and the home I've lived in all my life," he said.

Mutti's mother had died years before. Sadly we found out later that he was executed along with other men of his village about a month after we left, and was buried in a mass grave. We have been told it was on November the eleventh. We also learned there were 47 men of German ancestry executed by the

Russians (or possibly the partisans) in Kikinda at about the same time.

I was completely distraught about leaving my Ritzi, and begged to take her with us. Mutti explained that there was no room.

“We’ll be home soon, she’ll be just fine in the back garden,” she said, trying to console me.

I already knew in my heart that we had to leave her. It was a long goodbye for Ritzi and me. I cried and cried, and this must have made it even more difficult for Mutti.

We dressed in warm clothes, sturdy shoes, and our winter coats. It was October, and we faced the coldest winter Europe had seen in years. We were told we would be allowed one suitcase each. Meat had been packed in rendered fat, and placed in barrels, because we had been warned that meat was scarce in Europe. I don’t remember how many barrels Mutti had prepared. I think maybe two or three. We made our goodbyes to our frightened governess.

That night, German army trucks came for us. We climbed into the back of the truck with the help of the two young officers who lived in our home, and sat on benches that stretched down the sides. There was a canvas cover overhead. Another truck followed, loaded with our luggage, the barrels of meat, additional foodstuffs, and other possessions. We stopped to pick up my aunt Emmi, my cousins, and their luggage, then drove to the train station.

We could already see bright flashes of light in the clouds, and hear the menacing booms of big guns in the distance. It sounded and looked like a bad thunder storm. I was anxious and nervous. We were all very scared. I worried where Ritzi would hide, and what she would eat.

The trucks were driven up ramps onto the bed of an open train car that was used to ship freight, and were secured. We

## *THE NIGHT I LEFT RITZI*

were six children, two of which were one year old babies, and two worried mothers. I wished Vati was here, and I'm sure Mutti had the same thought. She did all she could to comfort us, and make us feel safe. All I could think of was what was going to happen to Ritzi; could she stay warm, and who would give her food.

It was the night of October fourth, 1944 when we left Kikinda. I was nine years old. We were never able to return to our home again.

I don't remember how long we rode on that train but it must have been two or three days. It was very cold, and uncomfortable. The train stopped in several towns along the way, and for a longer time in Szeged, Hungary. This city is on the border between Hungary and Yugoslavia, and famous the world over for its paprika. I think it was to check our papers, passports, etc. We got out of the truck and off the train to stretch our legs. I don't really remember, but I think Mutti bought us something to eat, probably from street vendors.

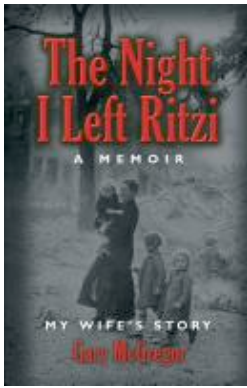
We were lucky because two days later the Russians who had advanced further into our country closed the border there at Szeged. We would have been trapped.

We traveled on across Hungary through Budapest, and into Austria. We stopped in a small town outside of Vienna, and left the train. I would like to be able to tell how we managed the luggage, the barrels, and other food that we had with us but I can't. Perhaps those trucks that contained our stuff were also taken off the train and parked. I just don't know the facts about this. I do know that everything was still in our possession as we continued our flight.

When we arrived in that small town we were taken to a large empty school building. It had been set up to give shelter to all the displaced people that were fleeing the war raging all around them. They had come from cities in Yugoslavia,

Hungary, and Romania. We were exhausted, and I was fearful of what would happen next. Soup made from mutton with a little bit of cream of wheat was given us. It was smelly and awful! To this day I don't like lamb. Its only saving feature was that it was hot, and my stomach was empty.

Then we were shown into a large long room. There was the sweet smell of the hay that lay in piles on both sides. This hay is where all the refugees were to sleep. I'm sure that there was a bathroom somewhere there, but I don't remember. We were still in a mild state of shock, and very tired but Mutti, holding Werner in her arms, wrapped all of us in her love. We fell asleep in our clothes as did my aunt, and my two cousins. I don't recall exactly how long we were in that miserable camp for displaced persons, but Vati came as soon as he could. I don't think it was more than a few days.



*This is the story of a young girl who was forced to flee during World War II along with her wealthy family from her ancestral home and her idyllic life, leaving everything behind, including her beloved pet goat "Ritzi." That young girl became the author's wife. This story relates her experiences during that calamitous and frightening time, her subsequent immigration to the United States with family, settling in Ohio, and later living in south Mississippi.*

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