

Parent Care: Love prevailed, despite challenges of a wartime courtship

by *Marsha_Kay_Seff*

You might recall a recent column about Gary and Margi Schmidt, who sold both their house and his parents' in order to buy a 4,000-square-foot home for both couples in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.

Well, I enjoyed meeting all of them so much and thought you might too.

It occurred to me after a few hours with Elly and Howard Schmidt that marriage is like jumping out of a plane. The lucky couples are equipped a parachute.

When Elly Grigo of Loetzen, East Prussia, took the plunge with Master Sgt. Howard Schmidt in 1947, she wore the silk parachute. In fact, her wedding gown was fashioned from a U.S. Army Air Force chute.

Howard believes their marriage in Giessen, Germany, was the first in the country to join a German and an American occupation soldier after the U.S. wedding ban was lifted.

The journey that eventually brought the couple together had been tough for Elly. She'd left home during World War II, gas mask in hand, two days before the arrival of the Russian Army. She was in Dresden on Feb. 13, 1945, when it was bombed.

The couple met at a German club located in a Bad Wildungen hospital. She had been working as a secretary at the German military hospital that was taken over by the Americans. Howard was assigned there as a corpsman with the U.S. Army. The Tacoma, Wash., soldier asked the young German woman to dance, and he was smitten. She was surprised that an American could dance so well.

The hospital later moved to Karlsruhe. And, according to Howard, his buddies hid Elly, along with four other young women, amid the equipment in the back of the truck. The couple moved a third time with the hospital to Giessen. And after an 18-month courtship, they married in its chapel.

It was lighted by four large candelabra and decorated with 32 dozen red, yellow and blue tulips flown in from Holland, Howard recalls. Both of Elly's sisters were there, though she lost three of her four brothers in the war. The couple honeymooned in Garmisch before heading to the states.

Though the arrangements were for them to go to New York separately, Howard says he was able to rewrite the orders so they could leave together by ship.

Before heading to Tacoma by train, Elly recalls, she stopped to buy three pounds of bananas, something she'd missed during the war. The couple sat in the back of a movie theater and ate the whole bunch, she says, adding that neither got sick.

Howard, now 84, retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel in 1967, after 24 years. Later as a civilian, he retired as executive director of a government medical quality improvement organization.

Today, besides their grown kids, the couple live with two "grandchildren," toy poodles Max and Heidi. Elly, 85, says she isn't sorry about not being a real grandma. She still flashes back on all the suffering of the young children during the war.

"We don't miss anything," she says, snuggling up to Howard on the couch.

Though she has dementia now and usually doesn't say much, she's delighted to talk about her life with her husband of 60 years. "It's a good marriage: We're both Pisces."

Howard quips, "I do everything she tells me." More seriously, he adds, "You have to compromise."

Elly's advice for a long and happy marriage: "Each guy is different; make sure you pick the right one. ... And don't forget your husband and children are most important."

Marsha Kay Seff is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's www.sandiegoeldercare.com, a Web site for older folks and their caregivers. She can be contacted at marsha.seff@uniontrib.com.

Parent Care: Love prevailed, despite challenges of a wartime courtship by Marsha_Kay_Seff