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English sample translation

Author	Margit Schreiner
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Translated by	Gerald Chapple

contact	Kathrin Scheel
email	Kathrin.Scheel@schoeffling.de
phone	+49 69 92 07 87 16
fax	+49 69 92 07 87 20
mail	Schöffling & Co. Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH Foreign Rights Kaiserstraße 79 60329 Frankfurt am Main Germany
www	www.schoeffling.de

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Divorce, Austrian Style

“I haven’t any idea,” my husband said, as he was fumbling through a huge pile of papers, “where my mother’s birth certificate could be.”

I pricked up my ears.

There, on my husband’s lap, was his youngest daughter, a two-year-old he’d just introduced to me. She clung to his neck and was watching me, with her lower lip thrust forward as if I were going to take her father away from her.

“But maybe,” he said, “they won’t need it.”

He reminded me of our wedding when the city-hall official presiding decided in the end that they didn’t need my husband’s father’s birth certificate after all.

“My father’s been dead for forty-five years,” my husband told the man back then, “and nobody knows exactly where he was born.”

My husband’s father came from Istria. His mother was born in the Bukovina.

“I can’t find my citizenship papers,” my husband told me over the phone a few months later. I’d called him in Trieste because, finally, I wanted the divorce. He expressed himself very firmly to the effect that I was the one who’d been in receipt of his citizenship papers and had filed them away in the folder for our divorce. But they weren’t there. All the papers in the file were mine, except for his high-school certificate and an old, out-of-date passport, and that’s the way it’s been for seven years.

We were married nine years ago, in Tokyo. We’d decided to do it then because I didn’t have a resident permit for Japan; I was the companion of my future husband at the time who was teaching German at the university in Tokyo, and so I was forced to leave Japan every three months and re-apply for a tourist visa from abroad. That took a lot of time and was expensive.

After three years, I’d passed.

The act itself was simple enough. We took the rapid transit from Tamagawagakuen, where we were living, to Machida, where the municipal offices were. A gentleman with a friendly smile spread out a paper before us with closely printed characters which even my husband couldn't read back then – and getting a notarized German translation later, for the divorce, was to cost us big bucks. We signed at the bottom, and the gentleman with the friendly smile stamped a big, fat, red stamp on top of our signature. After which, all three of us celebrated our wedding with some sushi, my favorite dish. It was one of the nicest days of our marriage.

And then, ah yes, the troubles began. The Austrian embassy in Tokyo asked for documentary proof of our marriage and this turned out to be so complicated – at least with my husband's documents – that we had to fly back to Austria in the summer holidays to take care of it, but we couldn't manage to do it entirely, even *in situ*. For it turned out that my husband's *mother's* birth certificate – we still had it at the time – bore some erasure marks around the last digit of the year of her birth, reason enough for some official in the Austrian registry office to request that the authenticity of the documents be checked and verified in what is today Rumania, and this dragged on for weeks. When the papers came back unexamined (the city my husband's mother was born in no longer exists, or at least the church's baptismal registry doesn't), the registry official gave up. He didn't want to review our documents anymore; he didn't even want to see my husband's father's birth certificate, as I've already said, and he put that in writing; so when we returned to Tokyo, the Austrian embassy official didn't want the document either, and after our marriage certificate from Machida was translated from Japanese into English, as was my husband's work permit and residence permit, and after various documents were translated from German into Japanese, our marriage was officially recognized.

After our marriage had been acknowledged by the Austrian embassy, we went to a good restaurant in Shinjuku for sushi – without any officials.

My husband's citizenship papers probably got lost when he moved from Japan to Austria. We were already separated, and I'd moved back to Salzburg some time before. My husband had a Japanese girlfriend at the time, who helped him move. She

was the one who took his parcels and other things to the post office. As he was to discover later, two of the parcels his girlfriend went to mail never made it to Austria. He said there were mostly photographs in them, including the countless nude photographs he'd taken during a particular phase of our marriage.

But what's "mostly" supposed to mean anyway? I wondered then and am wondering now if his citizenship papers mightn't have been in one of those parcels. Unless they're lying around somewhere in his Trieste apartment. My husband was always extremely half-assed about things, which is one reason I left him. And that's why it might also be that he simply lost the papers and has never really looked for them hard enough. The psychiatrist I've been seeing regularly for the last five years said, "The pressure of pain is not sufficient by itself; a man like your husband needs more than for you to walk out on him so that he can develop the will to divorce."

But how could the pressure of pain have been any greater? His lady friend, that Italian woman he's been living with for five years now and has three kids by, was pushing him day after day – or so he assured me over the phone – to finally get this business behind him.

My psychiatrist says that, in cases involving a stubborn *manic-depressive nature* combined with a well-formed *sthenic stimulus*, a total nervous breakdown would probably have to occur before one could even think about a divorce.

But I think *I* would have had a breakdown first. Four of my relationships had already been broken off because of my marital status; the grocer in Viehhausen, where I was then living, would call me every single day by one of my two surnames – family or married – and occasionally by the name of one of my constant companions. The tax office would send me my husband's tax forms, which I would forward to Trieste, but they usually didn't get there in time thanks to the unreliability of the Italian postal service – which meant that reminders, demands for payment, and the regulations about fees were all sent to me, too, and forwarding them took too long as well, so that more reminders, demands for payment etc. kept coming in. One time the bailiff came to the door, and I was barely able to escape in time to a neighbor's house. Every Spring the Austrians would send a notice to my address to pay the license fee for his dachshund that's long been peeing and pooping all over Trieste; and whenever

I had to apply for a subsidy for my municipal housing, I'd need his pay-slip which, as you can imagine, never came on time, so then I had to have it translated *and* notarized. Even when I left the church ten months ago they wanted my husband's signature. He had to come and sign his name in person, in the presence of the official at the office for those wishing to leave the church.

My psychiatrist said I was suffering from a hyper-fixation on my former partner, caused by a disturbed separation from my father. That was how he alluded to the fact that my husband is twenty years older than me. He turned fifty last year. Since my mother was turning seventy the same year, and my father eighty, my parents had really been looking forward to a huge joint birthday celebration.

And that was because my parents never believed a word I said during the last few years of our marriage, though I explained to them time and again that we were separated and our divorce was imminent. My mother kept asking me over and over, with a smile, how long we really intended to keep playing that little game. Eight months ago, at our big family reunion, she peeked at my tummy when she asked again. But she can't have seen anything. I was only two months pregnant at the time.

Shortly after that, I phoned my husband in Trieste to inform him the divorce absolutely had to be finalized in the next seven months. All he did was ask whether I'd finally cleared up that business with the illegible, over-stamped signature on our marriage certificate. My husband laughed when he said there was no way we could get divorced if it wasn't even clear that we'd been married in the first place.

And with that, I was at the end of my rope. I felt things were just getting more and more complicated.

After a long, panicky walk up and down the apartment, I phoned my psychiatrist to ask for a special session – he called it crisis intervention – and that's when he advised me to look up an old school friend I'd often mentioned in our talks about my early childhood sexuality and who in the meantime had turned out to be a well-known divorce lawyer.

When I walked into his law office, my friend from school was sitting there in gray pants and a shirt open down to his belly and playing tennis on the office computer. When he noticed I was there and turned toward me, his thick glasses sparkled in the

light from his desk lamp. We swapped memories of our schooldays, and then he explained the computer game to me. To work the computer better, I sat on his lap and was made aware right away that I was still someone to whom he was not indifferent.

From then on, things moved very quickly. He took over all contact with my husband, drew up the necessary papers in a mere two days, had all the documents translated from Japanese and English into German, had them notarized, declared the missing documents to be unimportant, and set a court date for the divorce.

On the day of the divorce my lawyer and my husband came walking down the long white corridor – I was waiting, carefully girded up, in front of the judge’s door at the end of the corridor – and he waved at me from some distance away. His face was flushed, and his glasses were shining brightly. My husband seemed very frail compared to him, very depressed somehow. The lawyer greeted me with a kiss on both cheeks, then clapped my husband on the shoulder. My husband said that his life’s companion was waiting in the café. Then the lawyer opened the door to the judge’s chambers.

The judge rose to his feet as we came in. He was young and wore his hair short in front and in a long, thin pigtail down the back, which I noticed when he turned sideways to show us our seats. My husband and I sat in chairs to his right, the lawyer on a narrow bench opposite us. The judge’s desk was in the middle.

The judge read us my lawyer’s brief at such a speed that I hardly understood a thing. He glanced over at us from time to time during the reading. The lawyer did, too. My husband seemed nervous. I could tell at once from the narrow creases beside his nose and his furrowed forehead. I was afraid he might cause an incident that would have broken off the proceedings, which would have been particularly embarrassing, given my condition, when all of a sudden the judge and the lawyer stood up. We remained seated. The lawyer motioned for us to get up. When we were all standing, the judge asked us if our marriage had broken down irreparably. Whereupon my husband distinctly answered, “No.” The judge gave a twitch. The lawyer took off his glasses, and I saw his eyes for the first time. They were small and blue. And strangely clouded.

It is perfectly ridiculous, my husband said, to use the word “irreparably” in this context. Nothing is irreparable, and nobody is really lost. “Alone, perhaps,” my husband said, walking over to the window and looking out at the bare autumn trees, the doves on the gravel paths, and the red-painted, empty benches. “Lonely and alone,” he said.

The lawyer whispered something to the judge, then he took my husband out the door. I don’t know what he said to him out there – he never did tell me – but when my husband followed the lawyer back into the judge’s chambers, he was beaming from ear to ear. He came over and stood beside me, took my hand and stroked it, even patted it. At the same time, he was watching me with what seemed to be a very dreamy smile.

The judge, after some hesitation, asked a second time if our marriage had broken down irreparably. My impression was that he was as tense as he could be.

“Yes,” my husband said, looking at me with a smile; and then I, too, almost at the end of my strength, breathed my “Yes.”

We stood there together for a while, hand in hand, my husband beaming, me in a complete daze; the judge congratulated us, and the lawyer held the door open. We were divorced.

And that’s when a completely different story began, about the lawyer, the friend of my youth.

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