***True Love, say the Americans***

*He was standing in uniform in front of the Hotel Bellevue in Bern. It was a Sunday afternoon, April 11, 1948, the sun was shining. Stationed in Germany at the time to help with the reconstruction of the destroyed country, he’d travel down to Switzerland with some fellow GIs whenever they got a few days’ furlough. That was 63 years ago. And on that Sunday in April, in front of the Hotel Bellevue on Kochergasse, 21-year-old Marianne walked by and saw John, with his thick black hair, for the very first time.*

By Stephanie M. Rebonati, Zürich, 2011

Translated by Eric Rosencrantz, Paris, 2016

Marianne: It was a lovely spring day. We saw the American soldier in front of the Hotel Bellevue on the edge of the Old Town and my friend said: “He’s mine!” We generally said that when we liked the looks of a gentleman so things were clear between us.

John: I first noticed Marianne in the evening at the Chiquito.

Marianne: At night I’d go to the Chiquito, a dance hall back then in Bern. Dancing was my great passion. Don’t forget: our generation grew out of a war. And all of a sudden the whole world was alive. People were dancing all over the place, they were motivated and happy. I always wore high heels. My brothers would keep an eye on me at the dance hall. My older brother, Heinz Bigler, played for the Young Boys club in Wankdorf and on the Swiss national team. The boys kept a sharp eye on my sister Emmi and me to see exactly who we were dancing with. There was a whole team guarding us!

John: Marianne was sitting at one of the salon tables. I was watching her from the gallery. I came down and asked her to dance.

Marianne: And we’ve been dancing ever since.

What language did you speak to each other?

John: French.

What language did you later write to each other in?

Marianne: It was a mix of German, English and French.

Did you know you’d see each other again after the night at the Chiquito?

John: No.

Marianne: Not really.

John: I did walk you home.

Marianne: Well, there were no busses running that late. We met up again the next day. Went for a walk and in the evening back to the Chiquito.

John: Then we exchanged addresses.

Marianne: Over the next 21 days he came to see me in Bern three times. He slept at the neighbors’. There was no way he could sleep at my parents’. Things like that were simply unthinkable. That’s all different now.

You proposed to her after 21 days?

John: No, no. We didn’t actually do that the traditional way.

Marianne: We liked each other, we corresponded for a year.

John: In July 1948 I went back to America for another year of military training.

Marianne: We just wrote to each other and at some point the question was asked, no proposal, just a question. Will you marry me. Just like that.

John: Did *you* ask *me*?

Marianne: Oh Johnny, *you* asked *me*!

Was it love at first sight?

Marianne: It was an attraction. More than a casual acquaintance. But I didn’t go dancing that often anymore. My father asked in amazement what was wrong with me.

How did your mother react when you told her you were moving to New York with your future husband?

Marianne: Unlike many mothers of her generation, she didn’t fight it. After all, she’d done the same in her day. She was from a bourgeois family in Germany. When they arranged an engagement for her, she packed her bags and left for Switzerland. Whereupon her family disinherited her. She waited tables in a café for starvation wages, and one day she met a construction worker from Bern, who had a limp caused by polio. This man was to become my father. My parents were soulmates. When my mother died, my father followed a short time after. He couldn’t live without her. They were soulmates. True love, say the Americans.

John: Marianne’s parents were very good people. Her mother was an angel. It wasn’t long before they took me into their hearts.

Marianne: I assured my Mama that John was a good guy. Her girlfriends were skeptical. But my mother said, “I raised her and I know she’s well aware of what she’s doing.” She never unsettled me, which unfortunately many mothers do to their daughters. Always saying “if this, then that”, which makes girls fearful. Those are the ones who never get married from sheer fear.

How did your Italo-American family react to the Swiss Miss?

Marianne: I wasn’t an Italian girl!

John: Yep, she wasn’t Italian. It was a big surprise to everyone. The first year after our wedding, we lived with my parents in Jackson Heights, Queens. I’d started studying at Manhattan College. After a year I was called back to the army. There was a war going on in Korea. I didn’t have to go to Korea, which was a blessing. I was transferred to New Jersey, where we were given an apartment because I was a sergeant. Our first son was already born at the time.

A year before the move you went on your honeymoon to Lake George, upstate New York, where some funny things happened.

Marianne: Oh my God, yes! John had bought a camera with 36 exposures. During our honeymoon I posed 36 times. When we got it developed, the man told us the roll was empty except for a single picture.

And what’s on that single picture?

Marianne: I’m sitting at the train station with a hat on my head and suitcase on my lap. The other funny thing was that John wanted to impress me with the Mountain View Room.

John: After all, she’s Swiss!

Marianne: In the room I looked out the window and saw hills, not “mountains”. He should have gone for the lake view. No Swiss lake is as big as Lake George!

You were short of money for a long time.

Marianne: We had a baby, John was still going to school. My mother said we could live with them in Bern if John found a place to study in Switzerland. He was able to enroll at the University of Fribourg and we moved to Switzerland for two years.

John: It was wonderful. Marianne’s parents got to know their first grandchild, I got to study in French and my tuition was paid by the US Army.

You’ve known each other since you were both 21 years old. Now you’re 85. How does that feel?

Marianne: Well, there were ups and downs.

John: She still looks young, seriously, she really does. As beautiful as the very first day. People don’t believe she’s 85. A Zürich plastic surgeon once asked her her secret recipe. She said, “You’re asking *me*? *You’re* the specialist!”

Marianne: And I like you even without your hair, Johnny. He has a perfectly shaped head. As a young man he had beautiful thick black hair. Really Sicilian. When people see pictures from back then they ask what in the world happened.

John: Really? Come on.

Marianne: It’s true!

Did you like how she looked pregnant?

John: I always like the way she looks. More and less plump. But pregnant – what did she look like? She was never fat, I mean she was pregnant but never fat. She should have been heavier, being pregnant, but she was underfed – sometimes we really hardly had any money.

Marianne: With our third kid, our daughter, my hips gave me away. We had returned to Switzerland in 1963 because John had landed a job at the Zürich office of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. I hadn’t told my sister Emmi a word about being pregnant and one day in Bern she says, “You’ve got a butt.” I said yes, adding that it would be gone in nine months.

John: Really?

Marianne: Yes. That’s also how I knew it was a girl. With both boys I had a little sphere here in front, with a girl you get wide hips and a butt.

John: We had a child every seven years.

Why seven?

Marianne: Our financial station improved every seven years. When we came to Switzerland in 1963, I said I wanted a Swiss Miss. I wanted a girl and that’s what I got. She was my little companion. And still is. We meet up at the market Tuesday and Friday mornings. For over 20 years my granddaughters have been coming along too.

You worked in Switzerland for the New York and New Jersey Port Authority.

John: I traveled a lot, 60 percent of the time. Marianne wasn’t always with me. But at international conventions she was: they liked having wives attending, sort of as hostesses. The point of these conventions was for Port Authority representatives to meet international customers, you might call it a trade fair.

Publicity for New York’s ports?

John: Yes. It was about various steamers, harbors, shipyards and so on.

You did that for 29 years. Do you miss the job?

Marianne: We think back on it a lot. Once a year we meet up in New York with friends from those days. At least those who are still alive. But it’s getting harder every year.

John: It was very exciting. Sometimes I regret retiring.

You’d still want to work at the age of 85?

John: When the World Trade Center Zurich opened in November 1988, I worked for another five years as their advisor. I worked till I was 67.

What was the most difficult moment in your life together?

John: A little after our first son Christian Salvatore was born, when I was called back to the army for the Korean War.

Marianne: There was no telling whether he’d have to go to Korea. I had absolutely no one in New York. Just a mean Sicilian mother-in-law. If he’d gone, I’d have gone home.

Why didn’t you end up going to Korea?

John: Our priest and our doctor put their heads together. Enough said. We got very lucky.

What was the finest moment with your wife?

John: Ha-ha!

Marianne: My soups. I always say cooking is a matter of love. You only cook for people you love. I like cooking for John a lot, he’s my best patron.

John: It’s true.

What did you miss most while living in New York?

Marianne: My family, but New York gave me so much. I know New York inside out. I love it, I was never unhappy there. I had a good friend, she was from Paris and in the same situation as me. We had the best husbands: they looked after the babies Monday and Thursday evenings. The stores were open till 9. For 45 cents we rode from Queens to Manhattan, got coffee and a slice of apple pie at Schrafft’s, and then rode home. All for 45 cents! In Midtown we’d go to all the chic boutiques and try on clothes. But we only shopped downtown at Union Square, where everything was copied and the prices were much lower. We were there with thirty other women in the changing rooms and exchanging clothes to try on. That was the best time.

You mentioned you were often short of money.

Marianne: We had different envelopes labelled “Baby shoes”, “Milk”, “Rent” and so on. His pay was divvied out among the envelopes, and the rest we set aside. On his birthday once, our son asked if instead of a homemade cake he could have an American cake dripping with icing that he’d seen in the bakery window. I wanted to get it for him but I had no money. So I lied to the woman at the bakery, I felt so bad about doing that. I told her my husband would come by and pay after work. I’m sure she knew the truth. I felt so rotten.

John: Fortunately, my studies were paid for by the army.

Marianne: We had soup every day, everything that gets put in the pot becomes soup. When the butcher couldn’t sell his scraps of liver, he gave them to me. I made dumplings, soup, marinated roast liver. And the next day I cut the dumpling in half and made John a sandwich with it. It was tasty and wholesome. We had fun, too. In 1960 we bought our first car. It was purple!

John: A 1956 Pontiac convertible in purple for 300 bucks. The kids loved it.

Marianne: Even your grandmother loved the purple car. One time some young women rolled down their window and hollered over to John that they adored the color. He was a little embarrassed.

John: No. We loved it. We always knew where it was parked. Sometimes people would come up to us in the street and, without our even asking, they’d say: three streets up, two down. The purple was a social magnet. I bought the car for 300 dollars. And just before we went back to Switzerland in 1963, my co-worker Ray wanted to buy it off me. I told him I couldn’t expect friends or family to drive around in a purple car. He went for it all the same and paid me 300 dollars! Two years later I heard the Pontiac was still going strong. It’s a mystery to me to this day.

What was served at your wedding?

Marianne: Chicken with fried potatoes. John’s nonna’s favorite dish.

John: Were there forty people at our wedding?

Marianne: Roughly.

John: Marianne had a cousin who lived in New Jersey. And she was sick on our wedding day. Marianne cried all morning.

Marianne: I was the only foreigner at my own wedding. John’s uncle’s wife lent me her dress, which looked like a draped satin curtain. Terrible. I wasn’t accustomed to that in Switzerland, people get married more modestly here. My daughter didn’t want to inherit the dress. And I really can’t blame her!

How does 63 years of marriage look to you now in retrospect?

Marianne: You can’t get married and expect to be the bride forever. It’s a rocky road. Of course there were times we wanted out. But where would we be today without each other? What would have become of our three children? We never had personal problems with each other. It was more financial problems, life’s frustrations. You can’t just throw in the towel when the first stumbling block gets in your way. We fought it out and worked it out, which is good. You can’t sacrifice yourself or expect the other person to.

John: We promised each other we’d never fall asleep angry. It did happen a couple times, though. Marianne’s a good mother, she raised our kids, I was always on the road.

You’ve known each other when you first fell in love, then as parents, pensioners, grandparents. In which role did you like her best?

John: As a dancer. She’s still a gifted dancer to this day.

Every couple has their song. What’s yours?

John: I can’t remember but I once requested it on armed forces radio for you.

Marianne: *Sentimental Journey* by Vikki Carr!

How does it feel to spend a lifetime with each other?

John: It’s cozy. I don’t mean that in the sense of dull. But in the long run, marriage is cozy. I couldn’t imagine it any other way.

Marianne: It still does me good to go away for a few days. Then you look forward all the more to seeing each other again. It does him good too, he gets so much done. You know, when John isn’t home, I miss him, and when he is there, I bug him. That’s life.

John: Oh boy. But she’s right.

How do you stick together for 63 years?

John: It just happens. Honestly now, people marry for different reasons: fame, money, power.

Marianne: Neither of us had anything to offer. We just married each other.

John: The trick is to marry someone you love. And if it isn’t love at first sight, you know early enough whether it’s right or not. My brother once asked me, “How do you know she's the one?” I told him anyone asking this question in the first place isn’t with the right person.

There won’t be another 63 years.

Marianne: No. It happens to everyone, and the older you get, the less terrible the thought of death is. I can’t put it into words but something in life prepares us for it. Let’s go out for dinner tonight, Johnny.

John: Okay. It would be nice if we could leave this world together. But everyone feels differently about that subject.

Marianne: When you get old and look back and see what the world’s like now, all you can think is: oh my God, fortunately I don’t have to live in this world for so long again. The present-day world is so different from ours after the war. We lived in one of the best times of all. Yes, the war was terrible, but we were young, so we seized life with both hands after the war. People still had respect for one another.

John: Today’s world isn’t real. I don’t know how to say it either.

Marianne: It’s a world of glitz and glitter. Every day’s a party from morning to night. In our day, a certain seriousness was still considered modern.

If you had to say goodbye to each other today, what would be your last words?

John: I love you.

Marianne: I’ll wait for you.

*Stephanie Marilyn Rebonati, the eldest grandchild of John and Marianne Cannizzo, interviewed her grandparents in 2011 for a seminar at Zürich University of Applied Sciences. Thanks very much to Kurt Brandenberger, the journalist who mentored this project.*