

Couple rekindles love after 57 years

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Posted May 1, 2017 at 5:09 PM

Updated May 2, 2017 at 3:16 PM

Christa Ward, 74, and Horst Rossack, 76, married Monday after living separate lives for nearly six decades.

The last time Christa Ward saw her fiancé, the two were teenagers living in Germany still recovering from the second World War.

They swam, they danced, they did whatever they could with their little money and big affection.

Their mothers disapproved of the relationship, and the couple married different people. Ward moved to the United States, the wife of an American soldier.

Fifty-seven years later, Ward picked up Horst Rossack from the Jacksonville airport. Now in their 70s, the two became newlyweds after six days.

Rossack, now 76, met Ward, 74, at a swimming pool in Wiesbaden, Germany, in the 1950s. Rossack was interested in Ward's cousin, "but that didn't work so well," Ward said.

They dated on and off for a couple of years, mainly spending time at the pool or dancing at festivals, until their mothers separated them, neither approving of the relationship.

"There was no way we could have stayed together," Ward said.

After nearly six decades, Rossack was a widower living alone in Berlin. He bought a computer to quell his boredom, and he made a Facebook account.

Ward has been married twice, and her then-job at the Albertson's grocery store chain transferred her to Gainesville 15 years ago. She's a great-grandmother, although her closest family is in Ocala.

Ward checks in on people who are from Wiesbaden on Facebook. Six weeks ago, she saw a familiar name: Horst-Dieter Rossack.

“Even after all these years I knew that name,” she said.

She sent him a message: Was he from Wiesbaden? Was he the same person she had dated all those years ago?

He took about four days to respond. But when he did, he was frank.

“The first thing he asked me is are you happy with life and are you married,” Ward said.

German time is six hours ahead of Gainesville time. For three days, they spent their hours awake talking with each other.

On the third day, Rossack proposed.

She said yes.

“I cannot explain how quick feelings jumped up again,” she said. “It was like we had seen each other yesterday.”

Ward and Rossack speak to each other in German, and Rossack, while he understands some English, is not a proficient speaker. During interviews, Ward spoke on behalf of Rossack or translated his words to English.

The couple decided Rossack would leave his Berlin apartment and join Ward in her Gainesville home. Rossack would be leaving only possessions behind.

“He has no family left,” Ward said. “Nobody’s there. He’s by himself.”

But because of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, Ward couldn’t see herself leaving the United States.

“It would have been crazy for me to think of leaving here,” she said.

On April 25, 5:32 p.m., Rossack landed in Jacksonville, almost two months after he proposed.

They were reunited after 57 years.

“Every day was longer and longer and longer until he got here,” Ward said.

She made minor adjustments to her four-bedroom home. She swapped out her bed for one that could fit two people. But her collections of pig figurines (she’s not sure how she got so many) and butterfly decor (her late son was collecting and raising butterflies

when he died) stayed.

They're not looking to spend all their time at home, anyway.

"I don't want him stuck in this house," Ward said. "I want him out there, seeing what's out there."

They've been to Sonny's, Ward's favorite restaurant, and have been shopping at Wal-Mart. Ward was eager to show Rossack the Butterfly Rainforest at the Florida Museum. If Rossack craves German food, he'll have to make it, since Ward hasn't been in Germany for more than half a century.

"We're not partying here or anything like that," Ward said. "There comes a time when you want peace and quiet."

Monday, the two made their way to downtown Gainesville, accompanied by Ward's daughter Lynda Geril, who lives in Ocala.

"I think it's awesome," Geril said once she, her mother and soon-to-be stepfather entered the Alachua County Family and Civil Justice Center. "I think the right person comes into your life at the right time."

Ward said her two other daughters also are happy for her and Rossack. Some of her friends, Ward said, showed disdain at the speedy relationship. That proved who her real friends are, she said.

And what matters most, she said, is how happy she and Rossack are to be together.

"We just connected better than we had the first round," Ward said.

"I think it's the best thing that has ever happened to us," she added.

Rossack and Ward woke up at 4 a.m. Monday — Ward usually wakes up at 6.

They made it to the courthouse 15 minutes before their 11:30 appointment. Both wore black pants and white shirts, Ward's embroidered with flowers. Rossack, a former biker who no longer rides but keeps the style, wore a black leather vest and do-rag with his prescription sunglasses.

They paid the \$30 ceremony fee and were taken to a small room. A smattering of chairs were assembled into a few rows, and a beige rug was at the front of the room atop the gray carpet.

Alachua County Clerk Jess Irby led the ceremony, ensuring their decisions were free and deliberate before leading the couple in their vows.

Rossack spoke with his German accent, quietly fumbling a few words. Ward giggled as she tried to put a ring on Rossack's left hand.

Irby pronounced them husband and wife, and Ward and Rossack hugged before sharing a kiss. Geril signed as a witness to the marriage. They received their marriage certificate, which they planned to frame at home.

They shared another kiss, and Ward leaned into Rossack's tattooed arms.

"I love she," Rossack said.

"Her," Ward corrected.

"Her," said Rossack. "I love her."

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