
*The Nine
Hundred*

*The Extraordinary
Young Women of the First Official
Transport to Auschwitz*

HEATHER DUNE MACADAM

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for Edith
in memory of
Lea
&
Adela

For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF

*The measure of any society is how it treats its
women and girls.*

—MICHELLE OBAMA

*Woman must write her self: must write about
women and bring women to writing... Woman must
put herself into the text—as into the world and into
history...*

—HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, “The
Laugh of the Medusa”

Chapter One

*It's a sad business, even worse perhaps than the stars
they have branded us with ...
because it's going to hit our children this time.*

—LADISLAV GROSMAN, *The Bride*

FEBRUARY 28, 1942

THE RUMOR STARTED as rumors do. There was just a hunch. A sick feeling in the stomach. But it was still just a rumor. What more could they do to Jews? Even the weather seemed against them. It was the worst winter on record. Drifts higher than people's heads. If the government had had any practical sense, it would have made a proclamation that forced short folks to stay inside for fear of disappearing in all that snow. All the shoveling was taking its toll on backsides. Sidewalks had become instant playgrounds for children who didn't have sleds but could slide down drifts on their rear ends. Sledding was the new national pastime—that, and slipping on the ice.

Every blizzard was followed by subzero temperatures and gusts of wind from the Tatra Mountains. Slicing through thin coats and thick, it was impartial and pitiless to rich and poor

alike. The wind could find its way between the seams of even the best-sewn garments and nick flesh with biting cruelty. Lips and hands were cracked and chapped. Leftover goose fat was smeared inside nostrils to prevent nosebleeds. As cold drafts sneaked through the cracks of windows and under doors, tired parents welcomed tired neighbors to sit on stools and fret together about the rumor in front of a fire, though many worried in front of cold hearths—even firewood was hard to come by. Some Jewish families barely had food. It was bad for everyone, worse for some.

Flames of doubt and uncertainty were quenched by reason. If the rumor was true, the most reasonable said, and the government did take girls, they wouldn't take them far away. And if they did, it would only be for a little while. Only for the spring—when and if spring ever arrived. *If*, that is, the rumor was true.

The *if* was so big no one dared to say it, just in case the very word would curse them with its reality. It simply had to be a rumor. Why would anyone want to take teenage girls?

THE SNOW BEGAN FALLING as Jewish mothers all over Eastern Europe prepared the Sabbath candles. In the Friedman home, Emmanuel Friedman came in through the front door clapping and singing, “Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shalom! Shalom! Shalom!” Clapping and singing, the children joined their father. Then the family gathered around the Sabbath table to watch as their mother lit the Sabbath candles. After circling her hands over the flames three times, she brought the light toward her heart—for it is a woman's place to bring light into the home—placed her hands over her eyes and murmured the Sabbath blessing:

Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner, l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat. Blessed are You, Lord, our God,

King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light Shabbat candle[s].

Edith and her sister Lea watched in reverent adoration as their mother prayed silently, blinked three times, and then opened her eyes. “Good Shabbes!” Her daughters hugged her, and she blessed them each with a kiss in order of age, eldest to youngest, but she bestowed a little longer kiss on the brows of her teenagers Lea and Edith. There had been other rumors that never came to fruition, she told herself, hugging her girls close to her heart. Her secret prayer to God that night was that this rumor, too, would be false.

Outside, thunder rolled like a great drum through the sky. Lightning flashed. Snow fell in sheets. No one could remember how many years it had been since there was a storm like this.

By Shabbat morning, the blizzard had dumped over a foot of snow, and by midday, it was thigh high. As usual, a few stalwart individuals started shoveling, figuring it was better to get the work half done and do it twice than to wait and have to shovel once but twice as hard. The tobacco shop was not only partially cleared, it was open. Weather never stopped a serious smoker.

It was unusual for the town crier to make announcements on Saturdays, even rarer than thunder in a snowstorm. Normally, proclamations were made during Friday or Monday market. But in the afternoon, out in front of town halls all over eastern Slovakia, drums started beating and, despite the blizzard, a few gentiles out on the street stopped to listen. The wind was up and the snow was deep, muffling the drum’s call to attention. No one in the Jewish neighborhood, across the low banks of a small river meandering along the south edge of town, heard it. The weather—for while there was always weather somewhere, today there was just more than usual—wasn’t helping.

Among the smattering of people gathered round the town crier stood twenty-one-year-old Ladislav Grosman, who for reasons known only to himself was in the square instead of at the synagogue or home with his family. Dark-eyed, open-faced, Ladislav was more likely to generate a smile than a frown, and laughter than tears. A poet at heart, he may have been taking a stroll after the family repast, appreciating the trackless white carpet across the square, wincing at the cold sting of snow pelting his face. Perhaps he just needed a smoke. Whatever the reason, when the town crier began banging his drum, Ladislav hurried with the few others who were out traipsing through the snow to hear the latest news.

Normally, the town crier would wait for a crowd to arrive before he began his announcement. Not today. He began at once so he could get out of the damn weather that was wetting his collar and freezing his neck. The flakes falling upon the heads of gentiles and Jews alike were large and wet now, a sure sign the storm was ending.

For some, it was about to begin.

Over the din of the storm, the town crier cried, “All Jewish girls of sixteen years and over. Unmarried girls [are] ordered to come to the appointed registration office; details of the medical inspection and the purpose of the whole business [to] be officially notified in due course.” There was almost no one about to hear. It was a blizzard after all. Just a few ardent smokers, but the men who did hear it turned to their neighbors to say, I told you so.

Not having any more information about dates or times or places to add, the town crier appended the announcement with his own verbal signature, a kind of Bugs Bunny sign-off, and one last roll of his drum: “And that’s the lot, the whole caboose, the dope the public is required to take notice of, full stop, *ende*, finish, *fin*, off home with the lot of you in this ruddy weather you wouldn’t put a dog out in . . .”

There were no more ifs, ands, or buts—the rumor was true. And by the next morning, even with the snow piled high against their doors, everyone knew it. The latest proclamation fell on the heads of the Jewish community as heavily as icicles falling from the rooftops but far more dangerous.

WHEN IT CAME TO DRACONIAN MEASURES against its Jews, the Slovak government seemed to be trying to surpass the Germans. Young thugs, who had joined Slovakia's fascist, right-wing Hlinka Guard, bullied and beat up Jewish boys and men wearing the mandatory armbands, which had now become yellow stars. Gravestones were toppled or smashed, shops were defaced with anti-Jewish slogans. In the larger cities, there were bloodcurdling, nationalistic songs, punctuated by a rhythm section of stone throwing, a cymbal section of glass shattering. Newspaper kiosks served up *Stuermer* (Striker), the propagandist newspaper that fed ignorance and racist ideologies while publishing defamatory caricatures of hook-nosed Jews raping Slovak virgins, cutting children's throats and collecting their blood for the baking of matzo, straddling the Earth as if the globe were a horse to ride and conquer, while heroic German soldiers fought the devilish Jew—humanity's evil fiend.

One woman in the market even asked Edith, "Where are your horns?" When Edith showed her she didn't have any, the woman was shocked. How could anyone be so stupid as to think Jews had horns, made matzos with children's blood, or killed God? Jews invented God, for God's sake!

How could anyone actually believe what the propagandist newspapers said?

In September 1941, the Slovak government devised a Jewish Codex, laws and regulations that began to be implemented with increasing frequency throughout the fall, until it had seemed like every day the town crier was making another pronouncement against Slovak Jewry. One day it was:

We hereby make it common knowledge that the Jews: must register themselves and every member of their family at the mayor's office in the next twenty-four hours, with a list of all their real estate possessions.

The next day:

Jews must present their bankbooks from local as well as from foreign banks and are henceforth forbidden to reside on any main street and must vacate main street abodes within seven days.

A week later:

Jews must wear a yellow star on all their clothing 24 x 24 cm.

Jews may not travel interstate and for local travel must have a written permit by the Hlinka Guard, costing one hundred crowns. They may obtain it only if the Hlinka Guard accepts their request as being a valid one.

But what Jew had one hundred crowns, and what Jew knew a Hlinka Guard who would validate their request?

Jews must deposit all their jewelry within twenty-four hours at the head office of the Hlinka Guard.

Jews cannot have pets—not even a cat!—cannot have radios and cameras, so as not to become spreaders of lies from the BBC.

Jews must deposit their fur coats at the Hlinka Guard headquarters

Jews must turn in their motorcycles, cars, and trucks.

Jews will not be admitted to any hospital and will not be eligible to receive operations.

Jews may no longer enter any high school, nor demand any reports from the various state authorities.

Edith still shakes her head at the laws that stunted her education. “My siblings had school still, to grade five. When they finished, the law said they had to go to school till age fourteen.” So they had to repeat the fifth grade, three times! Meanwhile, Edith and Lea fell in the difficult spot of already being over fourteen, and despite their yearning for knowledge and their quick minds, Jews were not allowed to finish high school.

Then another law passed.

Jews may not enter any public parks.

And another:

Jews may not employ any Aryans, nor socialize with any Aryans, visit any theaters, pictures or cultural festivities, congregate in bigger numbers than five. No Jew is permitted to be on the street after twenty-one hundred hours.

No one could have predicted the Aryanization of Jewish businesses, which allowed gentiles to legally take over Jewish businesses, and “all business practices to enable the fastest possible transfer of said business into the Aryantor’s sole hands.” No compensation was paid to the Jewish business owner.

“The only thing permitted to Jews was to commit suicide,” Ivan Rauchwerger’s mother said.

And now they wanted their girls?

It didn't make any sense. Why would anyone want to take teenage girls for work? Teenagers are lazy and argumentative. And girls? Girls are the worst! They giggle one second and burst into tears the next. They get cramps and get cranky. They are more worried about their hair and fingernails than doing a proper day's work. Just look at the floor in the kitchen, after Priska was supposed to have swept it! Just look at the dishes that still have kugel stuck on the side because the scrubber was looking out the window at Jacob, the rabbi's son, instead of at the dishes. Without their mothers teaching them how to clean and take pride in their labors, most girls would never do a lick of work! What teenager likes to work?

And yet, the world revolves because of girls. When they are sweet and kind, they are the sweetest and kindest. When they take your arm in theirs, you feel the most loved and valued creature in the universe; even the stars stop revolving in the heavens to say, "Look at that!" We depend on girls for their brightness, their effervescence, their hope. Their innocence.

That was why it had been so hard to believe the rumor circulating through the towns and villages of Slovakia—the rumor that was about to become a law. Why would anyone want teenage girls to go do government work service? Why not take boys? It was a sad business, everyone said.

Chapter Two

Where there is a Slovak, there is song.

—TRADITIONAL SLOVAKIAN SAYING

THE FRIEDMANS AT HOME sounded like a Jewish von Trapp family in a Slovak *Sound of Music*. Edith and Lea always sang their way through the morning chores, so the day was beautiful no matter what the weather. And who needed a radio with voices like theirs?

Hanna Friedman listened to her daughters sing and worried at the silence that would descend upon her home if her teenagers were sent away by the government. Who else could warble in the tones of Edith's melodic lark or Lea's throaty sparrow? Unaware of their mother's sentimental ear, the girls harmonized their way through the breakfast dishes, the sweeping and mopping of the kitchen floor, and finally opening the front door to let in a blast of fresh, cold air. Down the street, children could already be heard shouting and laughing in the snow. Mrs. Friedman snapped the eiderdowns free of dust and sleep, then folded the duvets back to the foot of the bed so the mattresses could air.

Outside, the world was a marvel of white. Rainbows sparkled in the snow, formed by prisms of icicles dangling off the