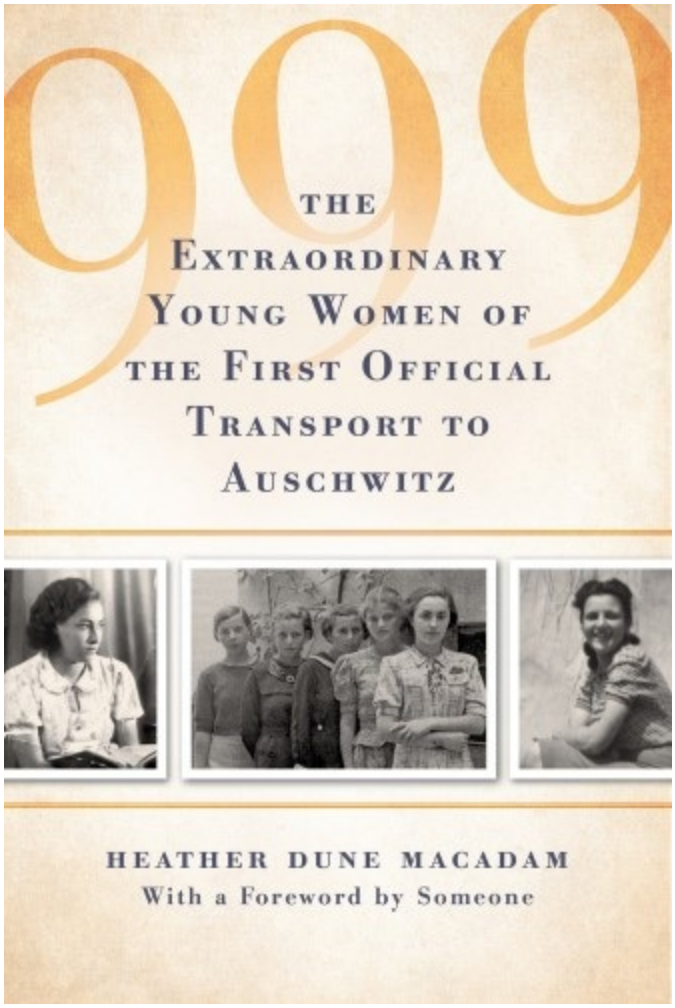

ALSO BY HEATHER DUNE MACADAM

Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz The Weeping Buddha

999

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

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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”

Foreword

BY CAROLINE MOOREHEAD

NO ONE KNOWS FOR CERTAIN, or will ever know, the precise number of people who

were transported to Auschwitz between 1941 and 1944, and who died there,

though most scholars accept a figure of one million. But Heather Dune

Macadam does know exactly how many women from Slovakia were put on the

first convoy that reached the camp on March 26, 1942. She also knows, through

meticulous research in archives and from interviews with survivors, that the almost one thousand young Jewish women, some no older than fifteen, were

rounded up across Slovakia in the spring of 1942 and told that they were being

sent to do government work service in newly occupied Poland, and that they would be away no more than a few months. Very few returned.

Basing her research on lists held in Yad Vashem in Israel, on testimonies in

the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual Archives and the Slovak National Archives,

and tracing the few women still alive today, as well as talking to their relatives

and descendants, Macadam has managed to re-create not only the backgrounds

of the women on the first convoy but also their day-to-day lives—and deaths—

during their years in Auschwitz. Her task was made harder, and her findings more impressive, by the loss of records and the different names and nicknames

used, as well as their varied spellings, and by the length of time that has elapsed

since the Second World War. Writing about the Holocaust and the death camps

is not, as she rightly says, easy. The way she has chosen to do it, using a novelist's license to re-imagine scenes and re-create conversations, lends

immediacy to her text.

IT WAS ONLY in the late winter of 1940–41 that IG Farben settled on Auschwitz

and its surroundings, conveniently close to a railway junction and to a number of

mines and with plentiful supplies of water, for the construction of a major new

plant in which to make artificial rubber and synthetic gasoline. Auschwitz was also given a mandate to play a role in the "Final Solution of the Jewish question," a place where, alongside labor allocations, prisoners could be killed rapidly and their bodies as rapidly disposed of. When, in September, a first experiment using prussic acid, or Zyklon B, proved effective in the gassing of 850 inmates, Rudolf Höss, the camp's first commandant, saw in it an answer to

the "Jewish problem." Since camp physicians assured him that the gas was

"bloodless," he concluded that it would spare his men the trauma of witnessing

unpleasant sights.

First, however, the camp needed to be built. An architect, Dr. Hans Stosberg,

was asked to draw up plans. At the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942,

the Reich Main Security Office estimated that occupied Europe would yield a total of just under eleven million Jews. As Reinhard Heydrich, second in the SS

hierarchy to Heinrich Himmler, put it, they should be “put to work in a suitable

way within the framework of the Final Solution.” Those too frail, too young, or

too old to work were to be killed straight away. The stronger would work and were to be killed in due course since “this natural elite, if released, must be viewed as the potential germ cell of a new Jewish order.”

Slovakia was the first satellite state to become a deportation country. For over a thousand years part of the kingdom of Hungary, and since the end of the

First World War part of Czechoslovakia, it had become an independent country

only in 1939, under German protection, ceding much of its autonomy in

exchange for economic assistance. Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest, became

president, banned opposition parties, imposed censorship, formed a nationalist guard, and fanned anti-semitism, which had been growing since the arrival of waves of Jewish refugees fleeing Austria after the Anschluss. A census put the

number of Jews at 89,000, or 3.4 percent of the population.

The order for unmarried Jewish women between the ages of sixteen and

thirty-six to register and bring their belongings to a gathering point was not initially viewed as alarming, though a few prescient families made desperate attempts to hide their daughters. Indeed, some of the girls found the idea of going to work abroad exciting, particularly when they were assured that they would soon be home. Their innocence made the shock of arrival at the gates of

Auschwitz more brutal, and there was no one there to prepare them for the horrors to come.

That same day, 999 German women arrived from Ravensbruck, which was

already full with 5,000 prisoners and could take no more. Having been selected

before leaving as suitable functionaries, they oversaw the young Jewish

women's work of dismantling buildings, clearing the land, digging, and

transporting earth and materials, as well as in agriculture and cattle raising, thereby freeing the men already at Auschwitz to work on the heavier tasks of expanding the camp. Coming from large and loving families, accustomed to

gentle manners and comfortable living, the Slovakian women found themselves

shouted at, stripped naked, shaved, subject to interminable roll calls in the freezing dawn, forced to walk barefoot in mud, fighting for rations, subject to arbitrary punishments, worked to exhaustion and often to death. They were

hungry, sick, terrified. The female guards, from Ravensbruck, were later

admitted by Höss to have "far surpassed their male equivalents in toughness, squalor, vindictiveness and depravity." By the end of 1942, two thirds of the women on the first convoy were dead.

And Auschwitz itself kept growing. Jews from all over occupied Europe,

from France and Belgium, Greece and Yugoslavia, Norway and later from

Hungary, poured in, soon arriving at the rate of some three trains every two days, each train consisting of 50 freight cars containing more than 80 prisoners

each. By June 1943, four crematoria were up and running, able to burn 4,736

corpses per day. Most of the new arrivals, whole families with babies and small

children, went straight to the gas ovens.

The surviving Slovakian women, their bodies and minds grown stronger,

devised strategies to stay alive, volunteering for the nastiest jobs, or finding safety in sewing or farming details or in the camp offices, becoming adept at escaping the daily extermination of the weakest, those who fell ill or who had become too emaciated for useful work. It was, notes Macadam, “a survival

seesaw.” The luckier found occupation in “Canada,” the ironical prison term for

the property plundered by the Nazis from the arriving Jews who had been

instructed to bring with them from home between 66 and 100 pounds of things

they thought they might need. Blankets, coats, spectacles, crockery, medical instruments, sewing machines, shoes, wristwatches, furniture overflowed across

an extensive network of depots from where teams of the more fortunate or canny

men and women inmates, working in continuous shifts, prepared shipments to

put on the trains back to Germany. It was later estimated that at least two crates,

weighing a thousand kilos each and containing valuables, were shipped back to

Berlin every week.

For a long time, the Slovakian women's families at home had no idea where

their daughters had gone. The few postcards that arrived, with cryptic references

to long-dead relations, were puzzling and often so peculiar that many parents were able to persuade themselves that their daughters were safe and being cared

for. But as the months passed, so fear spread, and it grew worse as fresh roundups took whole families away. One of the most poignant moments in

Macadam's book is the arrival of family members in Auschwitz, greeted with horror by the surviving women, only too aware of the fate that awaited their parents and siblings.

Much has been written about the experience of Auschwitz, the battle for

survival, the typhus, the gassings, the ever-worsening conditions, the starvation

and brutality, and Macadam does not shy away from the horror. Books such as

this one are essential: they remind modern readers of events that should never be

forgotten.

Her book is good, too, on the background to the Slovakian deportations, on the life of the Jewish communities before the war, the buildup of Jewish

persecution, and on the innocence of the families as they prepared their

daughters for deportation. She writes just as evocatively on the sadness of the few who survived and returned home to find their parents dead, their shops boarded up, their houses and possessions grabbed by neighbors. Of the

Slovakian prewar Jewish population, 70,000 people—over 80 percent—were

dead and the postwar one-party regime banned all discussion of the Holocaust.

Those on the first transport had left home as girls. Three and a half years later they came back as women, old beyond their years, who had seen, suffered,

endured too much. Just surviving made them suspect: what had they done, what

moral compromises had they made, not to have died with their friends?

THERE IS AN IMAGE at the end of this fine book which stays long in the mind. One

of the surviving young women, Linda, having escaped Auschwitz and the death

marches that took the lives of many survivors, having crossed countries in chaos

and devastated by the war, at constant risk of being raped, finds herself at last on

a train bound for home. The carriages are full to overflowing with refugees, so

she climbs on to the roof and it is there, perched high on the slowly moving train, that she looks out across a landscape which is not full of barbed wire or watchtowers, or guards with guns. She is, she realizes, free; it is spring, and the

trees are turning green.

Author's Note

“IT IS TOO LITTLE, too late,” Ruzena Gräber Knieža says in German. The phone

line crackles. My husband, who is translating for me, shrugs. At the time, Ruzena was the only survivor I had found who was still alive who had been on

the first transport to Auschwitz; her prisoner number was #1649. A few months

earlier, she had been willing to be interviewed for a documentary I wanted to produce on the first girls in Auschwitz; however, my own health prevented me

from flying to Switzerland to interview her. Now she is the one who is ill.

I try to explain that my main interest is speaking to her about Slovakia and

how she and the other girls were collected and betrayed by their government.

She sighs and says, “I don’t want to think about Auschwitz before I die.” At ninety-two years of age, can we blame her?

I send her a thank-you card, and then locate her testimony on the USC Shoah

Visual Archive. It is in German. We can translate it, but the Shoah archive did

not ask the questions I wanted to ask. Questions that have arisen since I met and

worked with Rena Kornreich Gelissen, a survivor from the first transport, in 1992, over twenty-five years ago. Since I wrote *Rena’s Promise*, family members of women who were on the first transport have contacted me with

more stories about their cousins, aunts, mothers, and grandmothers, and with that

information, more questions arose. I have filmed and recorded interviews with these families, but without a living survivor willing to speak with me —and a family who would let me speak with her—those questions were never going to

be answered. I understand the desire to protect these elderly women; if you survived three years in Auschwitz and the death camps and lived into your nineties, why should you have to think about that hell? I do not want to hurt anyone, especially these amazing women, by asking painful questions that raise

the specters of the past.

A year after my conversation with Ruzena, I sent an email out to second-

generation (2G) families and asked if anyone wanted to retrace their mother's journey to Auschwitz from Slovakia on the 75th anniversary of the first

transport. Quite a few people responded with interest, but in the end it was a small, intimate group of three families: Erna and Fela Dranger's sons from Israel

(Avi and Akiva); Ida Eigerman Newman's family from America (Tammy and

Sharon, and Tammy's children: Daniella and Jonathan) and Marta F. Gregor's

daughter (Orna from Australia). Then, a few weeks before we were set to meet, I

learned that ninety-two-year-old Edith Friedman Grosman (#1970) was going to

be the guest of honor at the 75th-anniversary ceremonies. A few days later, Edith

and I were speaking via FaceTime. We clicked immediately and she told me she

would be happy to meet me and my camera crew in Slovakia. Two weeks later, we were sitting together in an early Soviet bloc–style hotel room with dingy white walls and hideous décor, and I was asking her the questions I had not known to ask Rena Kornreich (#1716) twenty-five years earlier.

Like Rena, Edith is vibrant, quick-witted and sharp. A little bird of a woman

who lights up the room. Our time together in Slovakia was a whirlwind that took

us to the barracks where she and the other girls were held and to the train station

from which they were deported. At the ceremonies, we met the president and prime minister of Slovakia, the Israeli ambassador to Slovakia, and children of other survivors. In a powerful homage of tears and hugs, the second-generation

group I was traveling with bonded with Slovak second-generation families. At the end of our week, my husband told me, “This is not just a documentary. You

have to write a book.”

Writing about Auschwitz is not easy. It is not the sort of project one takes on

lightly, but with Edith beside me, I was willing to try. This book would not be a

memoir, though. It would be about all of them, or as many as I could find information on and fit into this complex history. In Canada, I found another survivor, Ella Rutman (#1950), and I flew to Toronto to bring the two survivors

together. Edith and Ella remembered each other, but even at their advanced ages

they were wary. As they spoke in Slovak, Edith cast a pained glance at me. This

was not the warm bond I had imagined—Edith had not liked Ella when they

were in Auschwitz, I realized. The meeting was awkward and distant until the two old women began looking through a magnifying glass at the numbers on

their left forearms.

“I can’t see my number anymore, it is so faded,” Edith said.

The memories are fading as well. But the truth is there, if you know where to

find it. Looking at old photos with Edith one day, I noticed Ruzena Gräber Knieža’s face.

“Did you know Ruzena?” I asked.

“Of course!” Edith answered, as if this were the most obvious question in the

world. “We were in class together and good friends with Ruzena and her

husband, Emil Knieža, after the war. He was a writer like my husband. We used

to visit them in Switzerland.”

I had come full circle.

MANY OF THESE WOMEN knew each other before Auschwitz, either from their

hometowns or villages, schools or synagogues; however, in the USC Shoah

Archive testimonies, it is rare that anyone mentions a girl's maiden name.

Sometimes, a survivor mentions a girl by her nickname or gives a physical

description of a friend, so it can be hard to confirm if survivors are speaking about someone from the first transport. Margie Becker's (#1955) testimony is one of those rarities where the full names of the girls she and Edith grew up with

are almost always mentioned, and because of the photograph of their class, Edith

has been able to identify most of those girls. It had never even occurred to me to

ask Edith if she knew Ruzena before I saw them together in their class photo, because Ruzena's name on the list of deportees lists her as being from a different

town. I didn't know she had lived in Humenné when she was a young girl. If only I had started this journey when they were all still alive.

As I am wrapping up the final edits on this book, my email pings at me:

My grandmother was on the first transport. I remember the stories she

told us. She wrote a book about the deportation, but she later threw it away,

saying no one would believe her. The first page of her written testimony

survived, and I have it with me. Her name was Kornelia (Nicha) Gelbova,

of the Slovakian town "Humenné." She was born in 1918.

Seconds later, I have opened an Excel file I created that has every girl's name, hometown and age in it, and Kornelia Gelbova's name is in front of me.

She is number 232 on the original list archived at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Even more extraordinary is that her sister is mentioned in Ruzena Gräber

Knieža's testimony. They were in Ravensbrück together. Both girls are on the same page of the list as three girls you are about to get to know very well: Edith

and Lea Friedman, and their friend Adela Gross. And on that very same page are

two girls some of you already know, Rena Kornreich and Erna Dranger.

One of my biggest concerns in writing this book is accuracy. I worry

constantly about getting the dates and chronology correct, and making sure the narratives have been accurately chronicled. Edith assures me that I am "never going to get it all right. No one can get it all correct. It is too big. So you don't have the date, so what? It happened. That is enough."

I can only hope it is.

This story has multiple narratives. The core of this narrative comes from my

interviews with witnesses, survivors, and families, and USC Shoah Archive

testimonies. Memoirs, Holocaust literature and historical documents have been used to further elaborate on those personal stories, the atmosphere and politics of

the time. My goal is to build as complete a picture as I can of the girls and young

women of the first "official" Jewish transport to Auschwitz. One of the devices I

have used to accomplish this is dramatic license. Where you find dialogue in quotes, you can be sure that those are direct quotes from interviews with

survivors or witnesses who are reporting conversations they had or overheard. In other cases, to more fully illustrate or complete some scenes, I have used em-dashes to indicate dialogue I created; I only do this when conversations or arguments were mentioned in a testimony but *not* elaborated upon.

I am deeply grateful to Edith Grosman and her family, as well as the Gross,

Gelissen, and Brandel families, who accepted me into their nucleus and have treated me as an honorary member. “You are like a cousin of ours,” Edith told

me at her ninety-fourth birthday party. Around her were her son, daughter-in-law, granddaughters, a great-grandchild, and another great-grandchild on the

way. It is a great honor and privilege to be part of these women’s histories, their

champion and their chronicler. They were teenagers when they were sent to

Auschwitz. Only a few ever came home. How they survived is a tribute to

women and girls all over the world. This is their story.

Principal Characters on First Transport

The number of Ediths and Magdas, Friedmans and Neumanns on the first

transport necessitated that I create names to identify our young women in a unique fashion. That often meant using a version of their given names. Our primary characters are referred to by their real names or the name they reported

on the transport list. (For some reason, girls often gave nicknames rather than the

names they normally went by—my first choice in naming is therefore the name

given on the list.) For the many duplicate names, another version of that name may be used (e.g., Margaret becomes Peggy). If a name is repeated more than twice, the last name or some alternative is used. That is the case with the many

Magdas and Ediths I had to contend with. I hope families understand this need

for clarity in the narrative. It is not out of disrespect that names were changed,

but out of the hope that readers can identify—and identify *with*—these girls and women clearly.

Please also note: In the Slovak language *ova* is the equivalent of Miss or Mrs. I chose not to use *ova* with the names of the deportees because some of them were Polish and would not have used that syntax, and the USC Shoah

Foundation does not use *ova* in its archives.

WOMEN ON FIRST TRANSPORT FROM SLOVAKIA, BY

REGION OR TOWN OF ORIGIN

Humenné

Edith Friedman, #1970

Lea Friedman, Edith's sister, #1969

Helena Citron, #1971

Irena Fein, #1564

Margie (Margita) Becker, #1955

Rena Kornreich (originally from Tylicz, Poland), #1716

Erna Dranger (originally from Tylicz, Poland), #1718

Dina Dranger (originally from Tylicz, Poland), #1528

Sara Bleich (originally from Krynica, Poland), #1966

Ria Hans, #1980

Maya (Magda) Hans, # unknown

Adela Gross, # unknown

Zena Haber**,** # unknown

Debora Gross, not deported

Zuzana Sermer, not deported

ą

Ruzinka Citron Grauber, # unknown

Michalovce

Regina Schwartz (with her sisters Celia, Mimi, and Helena),

#1064

Alice Icovic, #1221

Poprad Region

Martha Mangel, #1741

Eta Zimmerspitz, #1756

Fanny Zimmerspitz, #1755

Piri Rand-Slonovic, #1342

Rose (Edith) Grauber, #1371

Prešov

Magda Amster, #unknown

Magduska (Magda) Hartmann, #unknown

Nusi (Olga or Olinka) Hartmann, #unknown

Ida Eigerman (originally from Nowy S cz, Poland), #1930

Edie (Edith) Friedman, #19491

Ella Friedman, #19501

Elena Zuckermenn, #1735

Kato (Katarina) Danzinger (mentioned in Hertzka letters), #1843

Linda (Libusha) Reich, #1173

Joan Rosner, #1188

Matilda Friedman, #18901

Marta F. Friedman, #17961

Stropkov Region

Peggy (Margaret) Friedman, #10191

Bertha Berkowitz, #1048

Ruzena Gräber Knieža, #1649

WOMEN ON SECOND TRANSPORT FROM SLOVAKIA

Dr. Manci (Manca) Schwalbova, #2675

Madge (Magda) Hellinger, #2318

Danka Kornreich, #2775

Part One

Map of Slovakia, 1942, Showing the wartime borders and Some of the towns from which the first Jewish women were deported to Auschwitz. The town of Ružomberok is identified because it was bombed by the Germans in 1944. Many Humenné families died in the explosion.

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 cruelness. 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 edge of rooftops. Black tree branches were laced with a fairy dusting of snow. A pale sun cracked through thinning clouds as a southeasterly wind swept streaks of white across an even paler sky.

On a typical market day, Edith and Lea would head to the town center

carrying a basket between them and do the shopping for Babi, their grandmother.

They would see their friends and neighbors, catch up on the latest gossip, and read the signs posted on the notice board and around the square. On a

typical market day . . . but today was anything but typical. First, market would probably

be sparingly attended, as farmers were still digging out. When the farmers did arrive, it would be with sleighs and sleds of produce and the spare offerings would be frozen from the journey. But that was winter for you. Still, that was not

why today was unlike other days. Today, everyone was heading to the market to

see if the town crier had any addenda to Saturday's proclamation, which almost

no one had heard but everyone was now forced to believe.

The girls did not know anything yet. Not yet. And after being snowed in for

over twenty-four hours, Edith and Lea were probably anxious to see their

friends. Hurrying out the door ahead of their mother, they swung Babi's basket

between them.

As the girls crunched through the crust of fresh fallen snow and headed

toward town, they might have heard doors up and down the street opening and shutting as young men and women, eager to get outside, bundled their way

across the drifts and barely cleared sidewalks. There had been only the faintest

hint of overheard whispers, and the only way to find out what was really going

on was to sleuth out the truth. To that end, one of Lea's best friends might have

called out their names. With a knit hat over her strawberry-blond hair, Anna Herskovic might have raced to join the Friedman sisters on this atypical market

day.

Anna Herskovic was a cheerful, chatty girl with big brown eyes and pale

skin. A beautiful girl, among beautiful girls. Before the world turned against them, Anna and Lea had loved to frequent the cinema together. Real movie

buffs, they always saved their money to catch the latest feature, that is until movie theaters became one of the many places where Jews were forbidden.

Along the narrow banks of the Laborec River, branches of birch trees were

cut and dressed with colorful glass bottles to capture the tree sap as it rose with

the temperature. With the latest cold snap, the bottles would have barely any clear liquid at the bottom. But warmer days were coming, and the bottles tinkled

in the wind like chimes, pending the flow of sweet tonic that drips from birch trees in spring.

On either side of the railroad tracks, post-blizzard forts might have been built

in the snow so little boys could lob snowballs at each other in a microcosmic war

that echoed the one in Europe, though both sides here were likely soon to celebrate armistice by sledding together. Arming themselves, girls patted snow into their mittens and threatened errant lads daring to target them. Older girls, like Edith and Lea, could traipse across the small bridge into town unscathed.

Veering to the left, they took a quick detour to Štefánikova Street where their friends Debora and Adela Gross lived.

Štefánikova Street was fondly referred to as Gross Street by the townsfolk because eleven of the houses on the street were filled with the children and grandchildren of the wealthy lumber merchant Chaim Gross. Even Ladislav

Grosman and his family, who were no direct relation, lived on Gross Street.

If Ladislav and his brother, Martin, had been shoveling sidewalks when the

girls arrived, they would certainly have greeted the young women, though

Ladislav probably paid little attention to the teenage waif Edith. Over the weekend, the Gross family had lost no time in making sure that Martin and Debora were formally engaged. As Debora and Adela met the Friedman sisters

and Anna Herskovic, news of Debora's upcoming nuptials would have been the

latest gossip.

Adela Gross, circa 1940.

PHOTO COURTESY LOU GROSS.

Lou Gross, circa 1941.

PHOTO COURTESY OU GROSS.

Did the nineteen-year-olds jump into the kind of conversation only girls who

haven't spoken to each other in twenty-four hours can have? Add to that

Debora's wedding, and we can imagine excited hugging and mazel-tovs.

"Debora would have her grandfather's family exception and Martin's," Edith

recalls. "Double protection" from the proclamation. Besides the government

only wanted unmarried girls. Did Lea wonder if she should get a quick husband,

or did it seem ludicrous to bother? It must have felt strange to celebrate good news served up as an aperitif to bad.

Edith and Adela were not as close friends as their sisters. At seventeen, Edith

had not been in the same class with Adela at school, and that one-year age difference between them created a divide that teenagers can find difficult to cross. Adela's perfectly oval face and full lips peeked out from under a mass of

spiraling red curls at Edith's more delicate features. Marriage was a long way off

for the teens, who had yet to blossom into womanhood.

Irena Fein had worked as an assistant at the recently Aryanized photography

studio in town. A pensive and bookish girl, Irena was also dedicated to the photography profession and very likely honed her skills by taking pictures of her

friends. Adela seems to have had the confidence of a movie star and would have

made the perfect subject with her auburn tresses and ivory skin. Was it Irena Fein who took the photographs of Adela smiling coyly up at Irena's Leica, just a

year before the Jewish Codex made it illegal for Jews to own cameras?

Inside the Gross family home, Adela's three-year-old cousin Lou was the odd man out. Romping through the snow toward his older cousins, he begged the

girls to play with him. The girls may have laughed and hugged him, but their plans did not include babysitting. It may not have been a typical market day but

it was a day for market. They had plans.

In danger of being left with nothing but his rocking horse to play with, Lou

would scamper after the older girls on his stubby little legs, calling out the sweetest form of his cousin's names—Adelinka! Dutzi!—and sticking out his

lower lip in a dramatic but wasted pout.

— *Ljako!* His nanny used the family's own endearment and hauled the

toddler back inside, to bundle him up like a marshmallow before returning him

to the outside.

NOT ALL OF THE YOUNG WOMEN making their way to the center of Humenné for market that day were Slovak. After the German invasion of Poland in 1939, many Polish Jews had sent their daughters to the relative safety of Slovakia, where Jews still had some rights and Jewish girls did not face the threat of rape.

Dina and Erna Dranger were first cousins from what had once been a sleepy

village on the border of Poland called Tylicz, which had become a strategic border town filled with German soldiers immediately after the invasion. Their best friend, Rena Kornreich, had escaped to Slovakia first. The Drangers had followed. Both Rena and Erna had younger sisters living and working in

Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. There was at least one other Polish refugee in

Humenné; Sara Bleich grew up a few kilometers away in the spa town of

Krynica, where today you can still "take the waters" and find many different types of mineral water gushing from the mountain springs. They must have all known one another.

We can imagine Erna and Dina walking arm in arm down Štefánikova Street

toward the market that day, talking excitedly about their friend Rena's upcoming

nuptials. Rena needed to find a nightgown for her wedding night, which

probably elicited all manner of blushing and giggling from the young women.

With Passover just a few weeks away, they were also eager to send dried fruits

and nuts home to their parents, whom they had not seen in over a year.

A few years older than the Friedman sisters, the Polish girls would not have

moved in the same social circles. Ensconced in the Jewish community of

Humenné, the Friedman girls were from a well-respected local family, while the

Polish refugees worked as nannies for well-to-do families with small children.

However, passing the Gross family's home and seeing the others outside, the Polish girls would have waved or said hello. Adela's mass of freckles and waves

of red hair were as hard to miss as her smile, and they would have recognized each other from sitting upstairs in the women's section of the synagogue. Even

though the Gross sisters came from an extremely wealthy family, they never treated others as inferior. They were dedicated to living in a kind world, a moral

world, a world that helped those less fortunate and in need.

THE WORD *humenné* comes from the Slavic word "backyard." Never had a town been more aptly named. "We were a big family," Edith says of the

town.

“Everyone knew each other. Everyone!”

Once an important town on the trade route between the kingdoms of Poland

and Hungary, Humenné had been an important cultural hub for the arts, known

for its crafts, fairs, and market. Marble lion sculptures twitched their stone tails

above the wrought-iron gate of the mansion at the end of the square, though

“square” is not the right word for the long, rectangular avenue that served as the

town center. Main Street was unpaved; horse-drawn rollers made of logs and chain smoothed the dirt and gravel. Lined with saplings on one side and the town’s shops on the other, the square was the central meeting place for Jews and

gentiles. This was a one-car town, with one taxi driver.

Along the edge of the square, in front of towering snowdrifts, a few stalwart

vendors and farmers would have set up their stalls. The wind nipped the

ungloved hands of a gentile butcher winding his last sausage links together.

Wheels of cheese were covered with cheesecloth to protect them from the cold.

There were no green vegetables yet, just potatoes, rutabagas, a few parsnips. The

Slovak military police—the Hlinka Guard—stomped through the windswept

crests as if patrolling snow mounds was part of their duty. Booted, belted, and buttoned up against the winds off the Low Tatras and Carpathian Mountains, the

young Hlinka Guardists tried to look intimidating in their black woolen coats and jodhpurs. Barely old enough to shave, they did not intimidate Adela or the

other girls. Why should they be frightened? They had grown up together. And boys always like to play soldier. Still, it seemed odd that when the girls said hello, their old school chums chose to ignore or glare at them.

The world was small in this corner. It was impossible not to greet one's neighbors, but in the past year, those greetings had become stiffer and warier, whispered instead of shouted. Then, "all of the sudden, gentiles stopped

speaking to us," Edith says. "They even didn't answer when my mother greeted

them!" How could neighbors be so rude to one another? But everyone was just

that bit more on edge.

On a typical market day, Edith and Lea would have entered the marketplace

amid the familiar staccato of shopkeepers hawking wares and the animated

melody of shoppers bartering without a care in the world. This was anything but a typical market day, though. The Friedman girls and their friends may have laughed freely in the open air, but they were blissfully unaware of wistful glances, a stray tear snagged by the wind, an older policeman watching them for

a tender moment, confused by his own sentiment.

Once the afternoon market was open to Jews, Edith's mother would have

arrived with Irena Fein's mother and Mrs. Fein's sister-in-law, the local midwife

who had delivered Edith, Lea, and probably the whole Gross brood into the world. They would have seen Mrs. Becker with her teenage daughter, Margie.

Margie had a sharp wit and had acted in several of the Beth Jacob theatrical plays with Edith and Lea. Margie's family also owned the shop on the corner near the Friedmans' home.

Despite living around the corner from the Becker family and their shop, the

Friedmans were not close friends with them, because, as young men, Emmanuel

Friedman and Kalman Becker had vied for the love of the same woman. "My

mother was not only very beautiful," Edith says, "she was the most clever woman in the city." Emmanuel Friedman won her heart and they were married.

Afterwards, Margie's father refused even to speak to Edith's father, except

"when they went to the Shul for *Kol Nidre*. Then they wished each other all the best for a good year, a healthy year, a happy year, a year of richness. The rest of

the year, they wouldn't speak." Edith chuckles.

This was a real community. People fell out and made up, some had strict

religious principles, some had lax. It didn't matter. In the market, everyone knew

everyone else. Mrs. Friedman would have greeted Mrs. Rifka Citron—a strict

and committed Zionist—as they picked over a pitiful selection of end-of-season

potatoes. The Citrons were poor and they had a large family. They had children

almost in their thirties as well as in their teens. Their dashing son Aron and gorgeous daughter, Helena, could have been Hollywood movie stars, especially

if you heard them sing. Helena's sister, Ruzinka, had recently returned from Palestine with her daughter, Aviva. Scampering after her aunt, Helena's four-year-old niece brought smiles from Jew and gentile alike. A tiny towhead with a

mass of curls, Aviva was lighter skinned than most Aryans.

"Hitler wouldn't know what to do with this one," Edith's mother joked.

"There must have been a shiksa in the woodpile" was another Jewish joke.

Mrs. Friedman smiled at Helena, who had real dramatic flair and often

performed with Margie Becker, Edith and Lea in the annual theatrical

productions organized by the Beth Jacob school, back before the Codex changed

everything.

Despite themselves, the young Hlinka Guards watched the girls as they

moved across the square. The opposite of her niece, Helena had thick, dark hair and full cheeks. In the full bloom of womanhood, she didn't need to flirt with boys to torture them. All she needed to do was stand there. The other local beauty, Adela Gross, was more likely to smile bashfully and drop her eyes to the

ground when a boy caught her attention.

Somewhere between the bread cart and the kosher butcher, Edith might have

seen one of her former classmates, Zena Haber, with Margie Becker. It was good

to catch up with her friends, but their conversation was cut short when they noticed the pasting of posters on the sides of buildings and the town crier moving to the bandstand. The crier's drum thrummed the air, quelling the hustle

and bustle of the Jewish market. Shopkeepers and customers stopped their

haggling. Would there be further explanation about the bulletin slipped under the

cover of the snowstorm? With a proper crowd now attentive to his voice, the town crier read the latest proclamation, now posted with a smear of glue to secure it against the cold wind and printed in black and white for all to see. Of

course, for those who could not read, he read it out loud. Twice.

Voices shrilled with shock. Anyone who could not believe the news before

now came racing, as the town crier's aria carried over the earmuffs and hats of

the crowd, announcing once more and for certain that all unmarried girls

between the ages of sixteen and thirty-six had to register at the high school for a

health examination on March 20 and commit to three months of government

work service. Oh! And each girl should bring no more than forty kilos of her belongings.

That was less than two weeks away.

Voices erupted. Everyone—the rabbi, the priest, the tobacconist, farmers,

customers, unmarried girls—began speaking at once, questioning the crier, the police, the guards, and each other.

—What kind of work? What if they get married in the next two weeks?

Where are they going? How should they dress? What should they bring?

It was a cacophony of muddled speculation mingled with outrage and worry.

This ordinance had nothing to do with pets or jewelry or shopping. It made no

sense. Why would the government want their girls? Lea slipped her arm around

Edith. Margie Becker looked up at Zena Haber and shrugged. What else could they do? Helena Citron stopped playing with Aviva and looked over at her

married elder sister, Ruzinka. Adela and Debora Gross clasped hands.

THE LARGEST AND WEALTHIEST TOWN in the eastern region of Slovakia is Prešov, just

seventy kilometers west of where the Friedman girls and their friends were standing, gobsmacked by the announcement that would change their young lives.

With the largest Jewish population in the region dating back to the early 1600s,

Prešov was home to the Great Synagogue, near the town center. The building was deceptively austere on the outside but rivaled the city's Gothic cathedral, the

Roman Catholic church of St. Michuláša, in size. Amid silver firs and European

black pines, the cathedral's spires punctured the sky above the city square next

to a fountain that commemorated the day Jews were allowed to live within the city walls, over one hundred years earlier. A gift from Marcus Holländer, the first Jew to settle within the city gates, the Neptune Fountain had been given a

place of honor and had become a popular meeting place for young Jews and gentiles. No more. Once, sixteen-year-old Magda Amster had loved to sit in reverie by the flowing waters of the fountain where she could meet her best friend, Sara Shpira. Now, the park and even the city center were off-limits to Jews, and Magda's best friend had moved to Palestine.

Magda Amster in Presov, circa 1940.

PHOTO COURTESY BENJAMIN GREENMAN FAMILY.

TODAY, AT THE TOP of Hlavná Street, which is still the main artery into the city

square, there is a busy intersection of four-lane traffic and a complicated array of

traffic lights. In the 1940s, this corner was the site of the marketplace, where horses pulling sleds or carts for the vendors trotted past Jews and gentiles alike.

Trying to find some remnant of the past, the daughter of Marta F. points to the

busy roadway. Now there is a crosswalk instead of the house where her mother

once lived with her large extended family. In a faded black-and-white photo, Marta F., age thirteen or fourteen, stands in the snow looking up a narrow alleyway. It looks strikingly similar to today's Okružná Street, which still leads

to the Jewish center of Prešov. Smiling shyly at the camera, Marta is wearing her

Sabbath best and looks as if she might be heading to synagogue.

It is confusing to meander the streets of Prešov's old Jewish section today. A

dilapidated wall, tagged by Slovak graffiti artists, has four rows of barbed wire

secured to rusted metal posts along the top edge. Inside the enclosure, there appear to be mostly derelict buildings with peeling paint and wired-up windows.

It is hard to imagine that this complex once embraced three synagogues, a children's school, a "playing field for children," a kosher butcher, and a

bathhouse. As the daughters of Marta F. and Ida Eigerman wander the courtyard, we find the synagogue's caretaker's house and knock on his