



FRIENDSHIP
IN SPITE
OF HITLER

JUDITA MATYÁŠOVÁ

THE DESTINIES OF CZECH CHILDREN
WHO FLED TO DENMARK DURNING SECOND WORLD WAR
AND REUNITED SEVENTY YEARS LATER

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Denmark during Second World War and
reunited seventy years later**

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Dedication

I have dedicated this book to my parents as they have taught me to listen to stories. I would like to thank them for their never-ceasing support during my search for the forgotten destinies. A very big thank you goes to all the people who shared their memories and their families who have told me about what they have experienced, both their joys and the troubles. This book has come into being as a tribute to the survivors and to all those who have contributed to saving them. My special dedication is for Mrs. Galina Smilková, who helped me a lot, especially with English version of my book.

Written by Judita Matyášová
Translated by Andrew Oakland

FOREWORD

We all know the feeling. The world around us is becoming incomprehensible and the best hiding place is our room. A lair where there are no questions to answer. Not even from our parents, who, it seems, are from a different planet. I remember this period of my life very well. It makes no difference whether we live in 2013 or one hundred years ago; the feeling is always the same, and we all have to come to terms with it. We have to sail to other worlds, where we can be ourselves and find our own way.

This story, which has become very close to me, is about children who did not have the chance to return to their parents. They remained far away from their families and had to grow up more quickly than many others. In spite of and because of this, they share an indissoluble bond. A bond of friendship in which the friends are like a surrogate family.

Judita

In my home words were everywhere. On the way to nursery school Dad would hold my hand and tell me stories. Whenever I entered my grandmother's room there was no need for her to speak: the room itself told the stories. Photographs on the walls, objects in glass cabinets. One time when I was six, my parents and I were travelling by underground train. Instead of looking at people's faces I directed my gaze upwards. I listened to the words and pictured the faces for myself. When I was a few years older, I read the stories in the newspaper my father worked for. How I got into newspapers myself is the stuff of family legend. There was a pile of newspapers on the table, with a bowl of chili peppers right next to it. The peppers were lovely and red. I sank my teeth into one of them, thinking it was a cherry. To stop the burning I seized a newspaper and stuffed it into my mouth. "Ow! Ow! It's hot, Mom!" I yelled. Some call this baptism by fire. Those who are into symbolism call it baptism by the fire of journalism.

I issued my first magazine when I was twelve. We were on a school trip, which meant a few nights in a hostel. Boys and girls getting to know each other. Discovery and peeking. I took along several

handwritten sheets of my writing. Puzzles, games, articles. A kind of magazine. I laid the sheets out in the girls' room and for a while the girls inspected them with curiosity, but their interest soon palled and they went off in search of better entertainment. I leafed through my treasures and hoped that one day someone would read them.

It took me a few more years to realize that stories don't need to be looked for. They find their own way to their authors. My friends know me well. When someone tells me, "I know an interesting person," I prick up my ears immediately. I gasp for the breath that a new voice can provide. At first I was unsure whether I had the strength to take the stories down. But gradually this changed; I realized the importance of listening closely.

In 2004 I was working in the production office of the newspaper Lidové noviny. One day the photographer Jan Jindra dropped by, and he showed me his pictures of the anti-communist demonstrations of 1989. These streets were walked by the writer Franz Kafka, he told me. He had a mock-up book with him; as I leafed through it, I came to share his enthusiasm. The only Kafka I knew was the writer of Metamorphosis, the gloomy Prague wanderer who could still be found

in the city's streets. I learned that Kafka took his holidays all over Europe and a new world opened up for me. I had taken the bait. Two days later the photographer and I got together again and our five-year walk in Kafka's footsteps began.

I sought out history enthusiasts, not only in the Czech Republic but all over Europe. Collectors of old postcards, photographs, train tickets, early-twentieth-century travel guides. I hungered for their words and their stories. Only when I had enough of these could I begin to write. I wandered the streets of Prague, Merano, Liberec, Paris. I walked about in the past. All that was missing was the narration of someone who had lived through it. I would never meet a contemporary witness.

In 2009 all this changed. I had been given another chance in the newsroom. My life had taken on a daily rhythm. My job was to find a big story every day. By various coincidences these stories were often about the pre-war and wartime lives of Czechs who left or emigrated from their homeland in the course of the last century. People who carried their homes inside them, even though they lived on the other side of the world; and people who tried to forget – to erase the Czech past from their own memories.

I am not sure when I heard my first pre-war story. I remember the eyes of the witness, their quizzical look. Why does this young woman want to interview me? Why should I tell her about my life? Before long we were speaking easily to each other; there was no age barrier between us. Perhaps this is because I never see the other as an object of investigation. I approach the other but also I go into myself. The only thing I regret, and it happens all the time, is a question I am asked: "Do you have Jewish ancestors, too?" It is like being stripped naked at the point of meeting. In fact, this question bothers me more and more. It would probably be the same if someone were to say, "She's rather beautiful". All they see is the outside. If I start to write about Czech emigrants in Argentina, will they ask me if I have roots in South America? It's a strange old cliché, and it always gets me down.

As for the story of this book, for me it is definitely not "just another Holocaust story". I believe that it tells of universal human values that inspire, of the love of parents for their children and children for their parents, of help for the needy, and of friendship that lasts for decades.



The photograph of young Helena Böhmová which was published with my article in Czech Lidové Noviny newspaper on October 30th 2010. This photo has started up a search for memories all over the world.

CHAPTER ONE

Zuzana: It Happened, and That's That

Our first meeting was in January 2011. I had written an article for the front page of *Lidové noviny* about a Jewish girl from Jihlava. In 1942 Helena Böhmová was eighteen. She knew that she would be on one of the transports. She had her photograph taken, something to remember her by. The photographer wanted to know when she would be back for the prints. "When it's all over," she replied. She never did come back ...

She died in Lublin, as did her parents. In 2007 the photographer was going through his archives when he came across a portrait of a beautiful girl. He couldn't remember her name. He appealed to the local newspaper, and it put out the call, but no one came forward. In 2009 a group of students tracked down more details. Her name was Helena Böhmová. And a name is the beginning of a story. I first heard Zuzana's voice a few days after the article was published. "Helena was my cousin," she said. "Of our whole extended family, I was the only one spared."



The story has come a full circle metaphorically. In January 2011 Zuzana Ledererová, Helena's cousin, received the photograph from the hands of Vilém Frenzl, young Helena's photographer's grandson. At our first meeting I had asked Zuzana how come it was only herself who survived the war out of the whole family

I went to visit Zuzana, by now eighty-eight, with the intention of closing the notional circle with the photograph at its center. Instead, a whole new world opened up to me. She had lived in Jihlava before the war, she told me. She had left her home town for Prague. A few months after that she and her friends

had travelled to Denmark, and then they had fled across the sea to Sweden. After the war she had lost contact with most of her friends; she had heard nothing from them for seventy years. Her words started me off on a trail that would take me all over the world.

The beginnings of Zuzana's world are in the district town of Jihlava, with its Sunday promenades, brilliant-white church, magnificent synagogue. Uncles, aunts, cousins. Overlapping circles. Always the same streets, always the same holidays. A tranquil place about to be invaded by the Nazis. Zuzana tells me, "I was born in Jihlava and lived there until I was fifteen. Helena lived not far from us. Her parents had a firm for upholstered goods. We dealt in leather and had a warehouse on Hus street. Helena and I took French lessons together. She was rather quiet, not big on making friends, and very good-looking.

"We led peaceful lives until the Henleinists arrived. They changed everything. We saw them on the rampage every day, smashing up shop fronts, shouting. They hung their swastika flags all over town to make it plain it was now theirs. Our rucksacks were packed – we thought we might have to leave from one day to the next. Everyone wanted

to get out, me included. It was awful in Jihlava. We weren't allowed to do anything; everything was prohibited. I couldn't go to school. It got worse and worse. I wasn't allowed to go to the park, or to the cinema. People in the town knew that I was a Jew. When they saw me coming, suddenly they'd cross the street."

As I listen to Zuzana's story, I know that I want to hear more. Week after week I visit her and her husband Arnošt with my Dictaphone. But I hear nothing but words, facts, information. I keep asking myself: Where are the emotions, the sorrow, the joy, the disappointment, the curiosity? But the fact that I never get to see or hear them has its logic, of course: to Zuzana I am a total stranger who comes and goes. She probably thinks that I do nothing but switch the Dictaphone on and off. I try to imagine getting under the shell and into her world. I have an idea: I will give Zuzana my book on Kafka, where I try to convey more than just facts about the life of a famous writer. I look for small details that tell us what he was like. I show him as a living person, with strengths and weaknesses, fears and pleasures.

I hope that this book will help Zuzana realize why I ask seemingly pointless questions, such as "What was your favorite place in Jihlava?" and

“What was on your mind in 1939, when you left home to stay with your relations in Prague?” These bits and pieces mean far more to me than facts. They allow me to build a picture of her family. The next day Arnošt calls. In his usual half-angry voice, which actually contains no anger at all, he announces: “Thanks to you we didn’t get a wink of sleep.” I stiffen. What could have happened? He goes on: “We read your book, and now we understand what you’re doing. You’re crazy – you really enjoy it, don’t you?” I am so relieved that I laugh. Arnošt always catches me unawares.

After this we are more familiar. Zuzana and I have a kind of ritual. It is usually the three of us, hardly ever just the two. When we are alone, I ask her quickly what I haven’t been able to ask before. At the end of each visit I press her hand. Although Zuzana is almost blind, she is well aware of me. Whenever I come or go, she reaches into space with absolute certainty. I don’t know how well she perceives light and shade. I don’t know if she ever sees the outline of my face, but I do know that she moves towards me when we touch.

There are times when she keeps returning to certain moments in her life. But there are others when no breakthrough can be made, because of

details that drift about the narrative unspoken, like great icebergs. Jihlava, it seems to me, is a tender spot. A nasty town she doesn't want to talk about. But I have to go there. For a while at least I must enter her Jihlava world.

In Jihlava decisions were made about Zuzana's life; it was here that her family remained. My guide is local "detective" Mr Vilímek. As we tour the town, he takes me more than seventy years into the past. He is like an outspread map. He leads me unerringly to everywhere with a connection to Zuzana and her family. I'm acquainted with her school, her street and the square. We go to the store that belonged to Zuzana's father, and then to the house where she lived. As we stand in front of its shabby facade, the detective says, "So this is where they lived."

Thoughts race through my head. Zuzana's story. From here she went to school every day. This is the place she left. This is where she said goodbye to her family. I think of 1939, when her life was turned upside down. In March Jihlava was occupied by the Nazis. In April her father died. Several weeks later she left for Prague, from where – that fall – she left for Denmark. Soon the cogs are locked in the gearwheel. I see those spring days of 1939 as though in a film. The town is no longer hers. A few

weeks ago Jihlava changed. Flags are flying from the tower of the church. There are swastikas scrawled on the blinds of the stores. It is the night of March 30th, and the synagogue is burning. It is reduced to ashes in one night. Week after week of anti-Jewish actions. Week after week of fear. And then her father's sudden death.

The next day Zuzana and her two younger sisters sit at lunch. As it comes through the window, the sun is almost warming. Mother does not speak; she cannot. The table is set as usual, but for one missing soup plate – Father's. She cannot make herself put it there. She runs a hand over the tablecloth, smooths it down. Spoons ring against porcelain. No one dares speak; the silence is sacred. Now there are only four of them to bear the woes that will not let them go. They are like a desert island that no one may approach. And they are building a wall around themselves that will hold firm for the rest of their lives.

Mother looks up and sees her girls. By now they are almost young ladies. Well-mannered, poised for gradual entry into adult life. But this is no time to hold back. She must take care of them. That responsibility is now hers alone. How can they go on? What will they do? Where will they go? She

doesn't know, but she must find out: now she is head of the family. On the table in front of her is a letter. Her sister-in-law in the capital writes that Prague's so-called *Aliyah* school, organized by the *Aliyah* Auxiliary Committee for Young People, has been admitting new students – youngsters who wish to go to Palestine. There is still one place available, for someone aged between fourteen and sixteen. Although she doesn't show it, Mother is fuming. How can she make such a decision, just like that? How can she make such a choice?

“Zuzana, your aunt has written to me ...” The words stick in her throat, like a fishbone she would rather swallow. But they must be said. “She knows of an opportunity ... You might be able to go to Palestine. You'd manage, I know you would, and we'd follow you soon.” She tries to believe this, bites her tongue to hold back the tears that otherwise will surely come. She should say no more: she must be brave for her girls. This is a chance – for one of them at least. She has so much to arrange. I must be brave, she keeps telling herself. She puts on a brave face, like a protective mask; she does things as a robot would do them. She needs to arrange the funeral; she needs to agree on what will happen with their store. Josef told her about the problems

he was having there, of course. The German who took the firm into administration is now expanding in all directions. They call it administration, but it is theft. Without that man's consent she can make no decisions in her own family firm. She is powerless.

That evening they accompany Zuzana to the station. "Don't forget what we talked about," Mother tells her. "Don't cause Auntie any problems. This is quite enough for her as it is. You're a big girl now." She smiles at Zuzana. She would like to stroke her cheek, but she knows that Zuzana always draws back. After all, she's not a child anymore. Zuzana knows to do as she is told. She is the oldest and has to be sensible. She takes her place in the train. The journey passes. It is May; the approach of summer can be seen in the fields, but she takes no notice. It doesn't take long to get to Prague, but she feels like she is travelling to the other side of the world. She didn't want to leave her mother and little sisters, yet she knows that her absence will lighten their load.

The train arrives at the station, and she gets off. Her aunt has given her an address. One tram after another disappears around the corner, its bell ringing. Streams of people. "Excuse me. Do you know where the Ondříčeks live?" Everyone ignores her; everyone is in a hurry. But isn't it better that

way? In Jihlava I was under everyone's nose, and everyone stared at me. Everyone knew, THAT'S THAT JEW GIRL. Here no one knows anyone else, and that's a good thing.

Her second day in Prague. She runs down the long street. Noise from Prague's main station. The car horns blare, all around her the bicycle bells ring. She passes shops and reaches the corner. She enters the passage that leads to the large building on Těšnov street, and then she looks around. She is about to mount the stairs when a voice calls out to her: "Where to, miss?" The doorman is sitting in a glass booth. "To enroll. This is where our school is." "There's no school here. You must be in the wrong place." "It's got to be here. This is the address they gave me at the office. I'll go upstairs and ask again. Thanks for your help." Nothing will hold her back. She runs up the spiral staircase. Right or left? On her left she tries and opens a door. There is a hum of activity. Twenty youngsters, unpacking boxes, arranging books on shelves, handing around exercise books. She is relieved: she is in the right place after all. The *Aliyah* school. "Hi, I'm Hanka." "I'm Zuzana." Some are meeting for the first time, others greet each other like old friends. They must have gone together to Jewish

school in Prague, of course; perhaps they attended a Zionist group – Maccabi or Techelet Lavan. They went on excursions, took exercise classes and drew maps together. They dreamed of going to Palestine. Zuzana is a stranger to this dream – she barely understands it, and it is not her world. She thinks only that this school might be a way out for her, that it will take her away – a long way away – from here.

“Good morning. My name’s Egon Redlich. Welcome to our school. Let’s get to work right away. Write down your schedule and prepare for your first Hebrew lesson. Then we’ll talk about the what’s and the how’s.” She studies this small, slight man. He’s about thirty, maybe thirty-five. He doesn’t talk much, but everything he says has weight, like the firmness of a handshake. He inspires respect.

Slowly Zuzana gets used to Prague. It is nothing like Jihlava, where she has to watch her every step. Her aunt has rented a room for her in a quiet street not far from a large park. Sometimes, on her way to school, she cuts across the park, along a sandy path to a brick lookout tower with a view of all Prague. As she passes through the park she notices a couple in love, sitting in the garden restaurant. She is alone, a long way from home, she ... Sometimes she wonders how her mother is managing, how her

little sisters are getting on. How she would love to help them! But what can she do? She would just add to their worries. She is afraid to think too hard. She will be back there on Sunday. But it is like going back a hundred years. Jihlava suffocates her; in Prague she can breathe.

Everything is new. A lot of schoolwork, a lot of information. But she is fine with that: at least it stops her thinking about Jihlava. And she shares in her friends' pleasure at what is to come – soon they will be leaving the Czech lands. At the end of the last lesson they pack away their exercise books and go to the gymnasium. It is not far away, and it allows them to stretch their legs after a day spent sitting at a desk. The building on Dlouhá street is a world unto itself. The gymnasium for Jewish youngsters is in the basement and the offices of the Jewish Community are on the first floor. The second floor is occupied by the busy Aschermann café, as once she sees for herself when she is directed upstairs by mistake. Her eyes scan the all-male society, the bridge tables and the long counter. Apparently the building also contains a temple – an improvised prayer room – but that doesn't interest her much. Unlike her friends, this has no hold on her. Why celebrate *Hanukkah* and *Pesach*? Why eat

kosher? First they are Czechs, and only then are they Jews.



Zuzana went to several places in Denmark. She spent several months at Miss Pedersen's in Naestved, who ran a sewing school. Zuzana learnt many a useful skill there, which came handy later in Sweden where she worked in a textile factory.

She is truly glad to be far away from Jihlava. She enjoys her new world. She has so many new friends that she can hardly remember them all. Nemka, Dita, Hanka, Arnošt, Jirka and a girl with the

strange nickname of Midge. So far no one talks to her much; she is never at the center of things. When they go to the lido or even just for a walk, she keeps her distance and doesn't speak much with anyone. Sometimes she goes to the pictures, and sometimes to the park that overlooks the city.

June. Summer is opening up. She would like to lie in a meadow and look up at the clouds.

In the fall they left for Denmark. They would not be there for long – or so they were told at the *Aliyah* school, as they were presented with certificates stamped in red with the legend *Retraining Course for Aliyah Youth*. Official confirmation that they had passed the first part of the course. The second, practical part would take place in Denmark. After a wait of no more than a few months, they would be heading for Palestine. But in the end this wait would go on for four years. She did not go through it alone: close by she had Arnošt and many other friends, not least Nemka and a girl known as Little Ball.



Bike, that was almost like „second feet“. It was an only means of transport that could get Zuzana to her friends. It took her an hour, sometimes two, before she reached them. The locals say that it had been the worst frost in the past forty years.

An only surviving photograph taken of the Jews fleeing from Denmark to Sweden in October 1943.



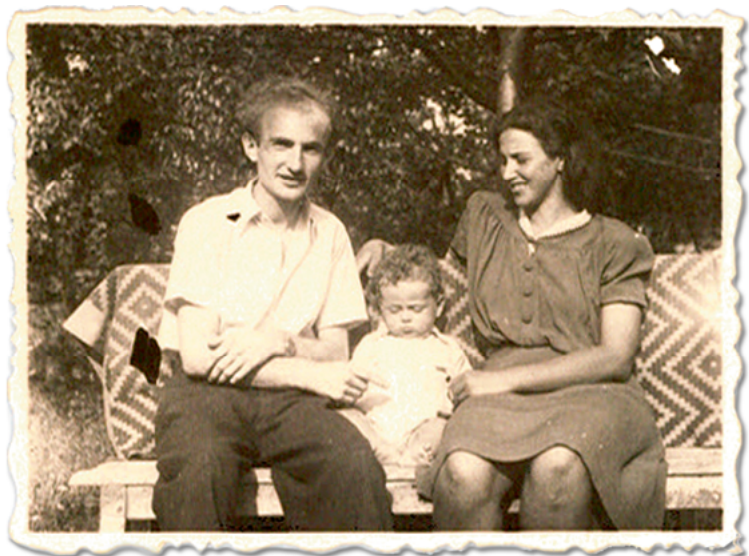
Arnošt left for England a few weeks after their wedding. Their sudden parting was rather difficult for both of them, after all they had been used to see each other almost every single day. Zuzana had to wait for weeks, sometimes even months before a letter from Arnošt reached her.

In October 1943 they fled together across the sea to Sweden. In fall 1944 she and Arnošt married; then they waited for him to leave. He had joined the Czech army. Although he had no idea when he would be flown to England, they both knew that their ways would part – in a week or in a month. In December, when he was called up, Zuzana felt that her world had ceased to exist. But they knew they must do what little they could to stop Hitler. She waited days, sometimes weeks, for a letter. Four would come at once, and then nothing. She wishes she could forget that time.

The war ended, and they could go home at last. But where was home? She and Arnošt felt like strangers in their own land. They knew no one and understood nothing. Everything had changed. The streets and the buildings were the same, but there was no one in them. No parents, no aunts, no uncles, no cousins. She found all her relatives on the lists of the dead.

They had been left all alone. What is there to say? How can one come to terms? No words can take the strain. Arnošt speaks up on Zuzana's behalf. "That was a desperate period in our lives. Two people with the same fate, we tried to get over it by starting our own family. Now, more than sixty years later, we

have two great-grandchildren. We couldn't move back to Scandinavia, but we stayed in touch with our Danish and Swedish friends, and we visited each other whenever we could. The fact that first Denmark and then Sweden made it possible for us to survive the deluge – that is something we'll never forget.”



Zuzana and Arnošt with their firstborn son Erik. The young married couple had to build their household from scratch after the war. They had almost nothing, but each other, which was the most important thing.

They tried hard to make their way. First apartment, first child, second child, first job. The latter didn't come about by accident: the much-travelled girl from Jihlava got a post at the Danish Embassy. But this was 1958, and work as a diplomat had its dark side. She was told to cooperate by delivering information to the police. This was unthinkable. She was firm in her reply: "Never. The Danes saved my life." The Danish ambassador interceded, and so she kept her job – for twenty-six years. Life goes on and things move forward; decade follows decade. Yet there are times when the echo of a pain deep within cannot be stilled. There are times when she returns to a past in vivid colors. What is there to say? It happened.



They had given up the idea of returning to Denmark. They knew they were going to stay in Czech and so focused on their new life. They settled in Prague, found work and spent their free time going on trips together. Arnošt, Zuzana and their children, daughter Ingrid and son Erik.



Shortly after arriving in Denmark Dita received a parcel - a wooden box. Her mother had sent summer clothing and sandals. She was after all supposed to go to Palestine, where the climate is very warm.

Dita: You Should Try Everything

This girl is forever laughing. I always see the same smile on her face. That smile is featured in every photo in her family album. Today I see it, too, although she is a few decades older. She shows me one picture after another. Whenever she remembers a story, she laughs; I have the feeling she is a classmate of mine from elementary school. She tells me her story in flawless Czech. Dita has not forgotten her Czech, even though she has been living far from her homeland, in Sweden, for eighty years.

Dita grew up in Prague, not far from Old Town Square. The building she lived in was called the Great Operetta. On the ground floor there were posters advertising music shows. In the afternoons, she would hear the singers rehearsing for the evening performance. Everything was connected to a segmented passageway. Dita left for the *Aliyah* school [preparatory school for students leaving for Palestine, ed.] through one door in the morning and came through another in the afternoon to her father's tailor studio. When she had the time

she went to gymnastics class. “I’ve enjoyed sports since I was small. I still do. And I also went to the Maccabi Hatz’air [Zionist youth group, ed.]. A lot of my friends went there: my cousins Slávka and Valda Jeitelesová, and Hanka Dubová and Dina Kafková. We learned that Palestine was our country,



(Left photograph) Dita and her brother Otto. Dita can remember the beautiful pink dress she put on for the photo shoot in a famous photographic studio Langhans.



(Right Photograph) Winter holidays 1938. Dita spent it in the Giant Mountains. When she revisited Czech in the nineties, she skied on that very same slope.

that one day we'd go there to work on a *kibbutz*. This was our dream, and one day it would probably come true. But when the Germans came, everything was different. Suddenly it became clear that a trip to Palestine was one way of getting away. I wanted to enroll at the *Aliyah* school, but my parents weren't crazy about that idea. They told me: 'Someone has to stay here. We can't all go away.' I hadn't thought of that. I thought it was a chance to be with my friends and share experience with them. Besides, I believed that my parents would soon be joining us. I persuaded them in the end. From May 1939 I went to the *Aliyah* school in Prague.

"Summer passed terribly quickly, and then everything happened at once. Our teachers told us that owing to the situation in the Czech lands our preparatory course could not continue. They had arranged foster families for us in Denmark, where we would learn how to work on a farm. On the day before our departure the head teacher gave us a calendar called a *yoman*. We were supposed to write down our impressions of Denmark in it. The first few pages comprised 'The Tale of the Bells', about an evil king who disliked some of his subjects. These subjects had to flee. Just before they left they were each given a small bell as a talisman. They spread

out all over the world and met again only many years later. And do you know what? This is exactly how it was. We really did get the bells at the *Aliyah* school. We lost them in all kinds of different ways, but a few years ago a friend had some more made.



Last photograph taken before leaving for Denmark. Originally Dita's parents were not overly keen, when she told them she wanted to leave. They did not want their family to part. At last she managed to persuade them and was looking forward to her far away journey.



Dita a couple of weeks before the journey. She was thinking about leaving along with her friends soon. She was glad to be about to learn something new and took it as a preparation for an adventure. She was lured by everything new, so why not try this.

“That bell is probably the only thing of value that I have. The Germans took everything else from me. They granted us special passports so that they could bundle us off as soon as possible. But this passport was only one-way, as it were. We had to hand over all our money and valuables. All I had with me was a small suitcase with the most necessary things. My parents packed quilts, clothes and shoes in a big wooden crate, which they sent on to me in Denmark. My mother had lined it with wax paper and folded everything beautifully. She’d had several summer dresses made for me in the belief that

Denmark was just a stopping-off point. Who could have imagined that we'd stay there for four years and then never reach Palestine?"

Midnight on October 24th, 1939. The final hours before departure. At Prague's Masaryk Station children herd next to the train, looking forward to their trip together. Parents stand by, watching their offspring. It is like releasing a bird that wants to fly but barely knows how. Slowly the train starts to move along the platform. The children wave and the parents struggle to smile. Have they done the right thing? Of course they have, they are sending them to safety. One last time and never again.

It is a cold night. The journey passes quickly. Dita and her friends talk and sing. Sometimes someone falls asleep for a while. They are in Berlin almost before they know it. Dita grabs her suitcase and stays close to the others. They travel together by underground train – a few stops before they reach another railway station. The train takes them to the last station along the coast, Warnemünde, a port. Her first time on a boat, her first time at sea. When they reach dry land they are in Denmark. Two hours more by train and they are at their destination. One night in Copenhagen. In a strange

country, a strange bed: everything is strange. Nothing is familiar to her but her friends.

“Each of you will go to a different family, in a different place,” Anne-Marie Nielsen [representative of the League for Peace and Freedom, the charity that arranged Danish foster families for the children, ed.] explains to them. Disappointment, anger. How could this happen? They wanted to be all together! But this is not possible, for reasons of safety. So many Jewish children would arouse suspicion.

Dita and her friends are each given a slip of paper with the name of the village where their foster family lives. They gaze through the train window at the landscape: it is not at all like the Czech countryside. Denmark’s landscape is infinitely tame. No hills, no mountains, no forests. Just green and gray flatlands, here and there an isolated farmstead.

“My slip of paper bore the name Rislev,” Dita remembers. “The moment came when Mrs Nielsen pointed at the exit and told me: ‘This is your stop. Say goodbye to your friends.’ The station was a tin shed. I stood there, expecting to be collected by my foster family. But there was no one there. I was all alone. No building for miles, just fields and meadows. I didn’t know what to do. Where

could I go? I felt dreadful, all alone like that, so far from home. About an hour later, a train pulled in and three girls got off. I tried speaking German to them and one of them understood. 'So you're the one who's coming to us today?' It turned out that her parents were waiting for me in a neighboring village. She picked up her bike and went with me to Nielsminde, their farm in Rislev."



The foster family of Dynessens lived in Rislev. Dita (in checked dress) got used to her new home fast. "They were like friends to me," says Dita and remembers how the family prepared a birthday party for her and asked her how her parents were doing.

Three large farm buildings. A room with one bed, one shelf and a window looking out on a dirt road. Danish households had a fixed order – that Dita had to learn. On the farm she did everything that was asked of her.

“Sitting and studying at a school desk in Prague was a terrible nuisance. Working outdoors and in the fields was something completely different. I enjoyed it tremendously. Feeding the chickens, making the lunches, looking after the children, cleaning up in the kitchen. In the evening I would fall into bed. There was no time for sorrow. In the beginning I missed my parents, when I read the letters they sent me. They were cross with me for writing to them so little. But what could I do about it? I was on the go all day. Only many years later did I realize what my letters must have meant to them. The letters were all that told them I was safe and well.”

The letters from her parents come several times a week. The postman pulls up at the farm and hands her another missive from home. Dita's mother keeps fretting that she'll freeze in Denmark. Of course she's cold, it's the worst winter for forty years, but Dita doesn't write this to them. To me, she prefers to describe what it was like to go to the fields at five

in the morning to pull up beets. “I didn’t even have proper trousers, just thin stockings. We didn’t have much, and we didn’t have any money at all, but I didn’t think about that. I was happy in Denmark, except for the food. What they eat is completely different. While we eat, say, potatoes, gravy and meat, they’ll have a piece of bread and cold fish. I had to get used to that, but that’s normal, isn’t it?



Dita (third from the right) spent all her free time with her friends. Together they made trips in the surroundings of Naestved, learned Hebrew, or just chatted. Girly troubles and joys.

People from elsewhere should adapt. We didn't give much thought to our troubles. My friends and I were hoping we'd be leaving soon – this was a happy thought that kept us going.”



One of many trips to the seaside. Sometimes they got a half a day off and so set off for the sea or just in the countryside around Naestved. They enjoyed the couple of hours they had to themselves only.

Life in Denmark passed quickly, to the rhythm of everyday concerns. Then, in October 1943, the Nazis decided to round up all the Jews who were

in Denmark at that time. "Someone in the village warned me. I had to leave straight away. I grabbed a few things, got on a bike and rode for a long time,



Sport has been Dita's favourite pastime since childhood until today. She goes walking every day or gets on her bike and cycles a couple of kilometers. Being in good health is normal, after all.

until I reached the coast. I met several friends on the way. We came to a fishing village, where there were lots of people, all of them wanting to get away. The fishermen wouldn't let us on their boats until we paid them. Somehow we survived the twelve-hour journey in the hold. [Usually it takes one hour to get from Denmark to Sweden. This journey was of longer duration owing to Nazi sea patrols, ed.]

"I got a job in Hedemora, a small town north of Stockholm. I was working on a farm again, like my friends who had rented the building of an old country school, where they lived together. But I told myself I would prefer to do something else. I'd always had something to do with children. In the summer of 1945 I got a job as a children's nurse in a Helsingborg hospital – at Ramlösa, a spa, where concentration camp survivors came to recover. They needed someone who could interpret from Polish. Although I didn't know Polish, that didn't seem to matter – Czech and Polish are very similar. Two months later I got a job at a kindergarten in Helsingborg. After that the time passed pretty quickly. I met Ragnar, my future husband. He's a Catholic and didn't know a lot about Judaism. As for Czechoslovakia, he knew nothing at all, but

what did that matter? We married in 1951. Then came children and everyday cares.

“I didn’t find out about what had happened to my family until after the war. I couldn’t believe that they’d all died, even my younger brother. The only ones spared were an aunt and a cousin. For a long time I couldn’t go to Czechoslovakia because of the communist rule. I didn’t go there for a visit until the late fifties. We could sense the lack of freedom in Czechoslovakia. People had to talk in riddles and the communists kept a close eye on every foreigner. In 1989, when the communist regime fell, everything changed. Suddenly it was possible to travel about freely. We were no longer afraid to speak with our own relatives. And that was a beautiful thing.” A smiling Dita turns to her piano and plays me a Czech song she knows from home, from the Great Operetta.





Mily Petřo. V nedělní odpoledne jsem si na Těle zapomená a někde
jsem táčovi, se kůže je láska a Praxe na Glorii ať na Spasitě Pově
a tam píše jsem - a kade' jsem ho schoval. V pondělí jsem zapomená

The story of Hanka Dubová has been revealed to me gradually. The survivor's memories, her letters, her diaries. I have been putting together a picture of a girl who had always been out there for herself.

Hanka: To Thine Own Self Be True

“Hanka Dubová – I know her!” I heard this cry several times, always in a different language. In the Czech Republic, in Denmark and in Israel I built up a picture of Hanka’s life. In spring 2011, I went to Naestved in Denmark to search for Children. I was hoping that the locals would remember Hanka: she spent four wartime years among them. A local newspaper published an article about my search, including a list of Children’s names. The reaction of readers went way beyond my expectations. Two of the responses concerned Hanka Dubová from Kolín.

The first letter was from a lady called Elise. A handwritten envelope that contained, apart from a letter, a black-and-white photograph and a slip of paper. She wrote: “I knew Hanka. In 1943, we went to the same school in Soro. We saw each other almost every day. In the holidays she spent a few days at our place. I am enclosing a photograph of her and the dedication she wrote in my album. If you know anything about Hanka, please let me know.” The second person to mention this girl from

Kolín was a gentleman called Knud-Arne Nygaard. “In 1942 and 1943, Hanka lived on my parents’ farm. My mother remembers her well. I believe that they were close, as my mother has often spoken about her. She last saw Hanka at the end of the war. After that, they lost touch. If you have any news of this girl, please let me know.” At that time I had no idea how to answer these people. But my task was clear, and I hoped I would manage it.

In May 2012, I publish an article about the search for the Children in *Lidové noviny*. It includes a photograph of the whole group that was in Denmark. Spoiled, perhaps, by my earlier experiences, I hope that this time, too, someone will get in touch. A week passes. And a second. Still nothing. Then someone leaves a message on my phone: “In the photograph published with your article I recognized by cousin Hanka. She and I stayed in touch for seventy-five years. Feel free to give me a call. Eva.” The bait has been taken, and I am caught in my own net. I call back immediately, and a few days later I pay Eva a visit; she lives in Prague. We study old photographs and drink elderflower squash, or rather I talk and listen and have no time for drinking. I lap up every word and discover more and more about Hanka’s world.

Hanka was born in 1925 in Kolín, but when she was seven her family moved to Prague, where they rented a store on the corner of Celetná street and Old Town Square – not a small grocer's, but the Dub House of Childrenswear. "They had some lovely things," says Eva, who is seven years Hanka's junior. "Suits, skirts, all from the latest French designs. I remember this greenish dress I had, with stitching from top to bottom. Something completely different from what the other girls wore. My parents and Hanka's saw each other very often. She and I would travel out to Kolín to see our grandmother and other relatives. Hanka went to the French high school. In her free time she did physical training with the Maccabi Zionist group. Once she took me with her, but it didn't mean much to me. All that passion for life in Palestine – it was nothing for me. All I know after that is that she left for Denmark in October 1939. She wrote to us that she was working on a farm, and that she had friends from home there. We also found out that in October 1943 she fled to Sweden, where she stayed until the end of the war. When she got no replies to the letters she sent to her parents, she realized they must have suffered the same fate as thousands of others ... Her only link with home was with us, in particular my mother