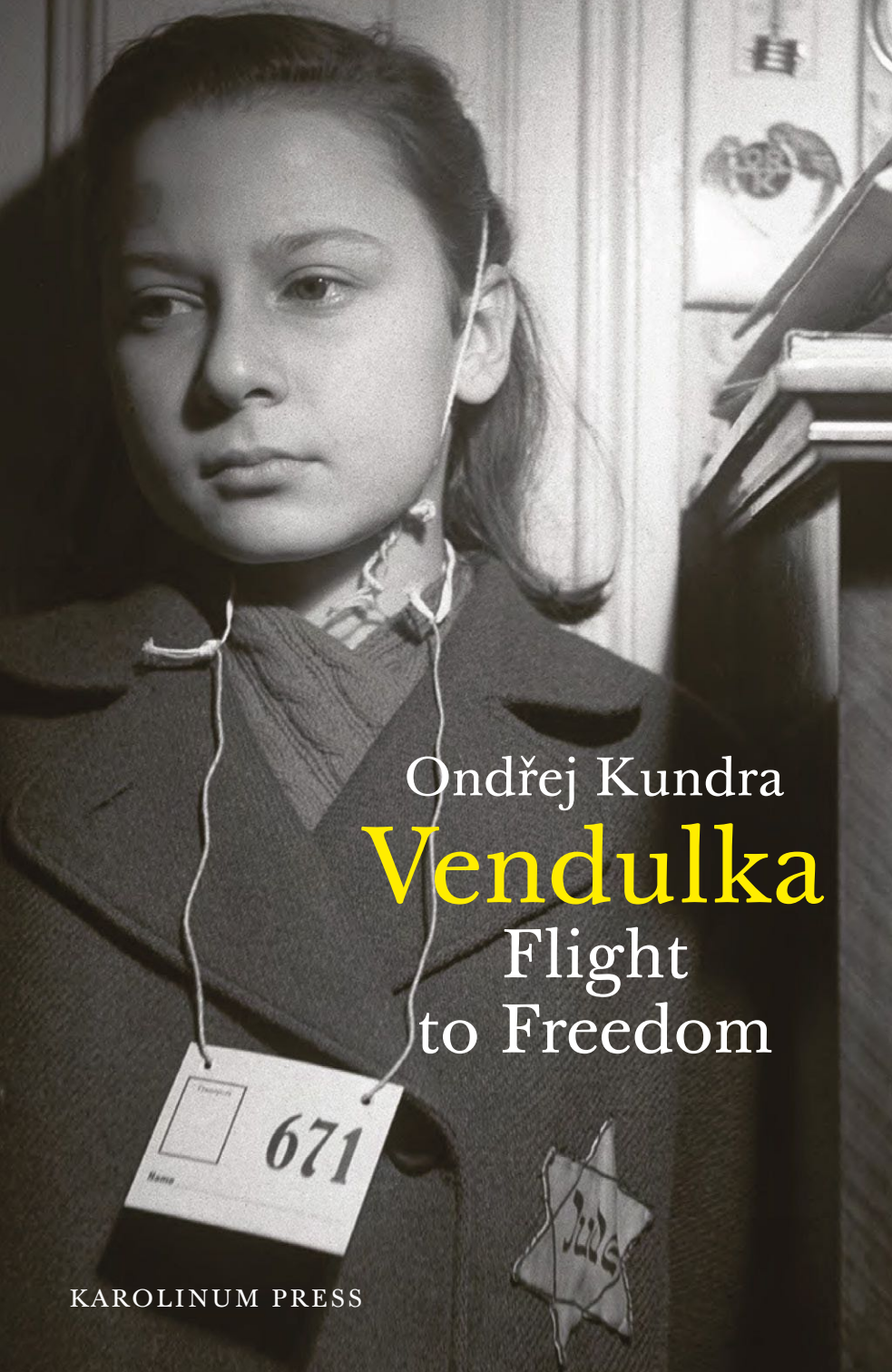

Ondřej Kundra

Vendulka

Flight to Freedom

KAROLINUM PRESS

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Together for the Last Time

Jan Lukas hung around at the Vogls' until late into the night. Dinner was mostly a silent affair, with almost no one saying a word. Then Karla started to pack their things – a maximum of 50 kilos and two pieces of luggage per person, as stated in the official instructions – and Jan took out his camera. Usually he tried to compose his shots in daylight, but it was already dark; it was still only March and sunset came early. He therefore reluctantly unpacked his flashgun and attached it to his camera. He then focused his lens and pressed the shutter release.

In the first photo, Vendulka is sitting with her mother at the dining table, which is covered in what looks like the contents of a chest of long-concealed treasures. There are soaps, medicines manufactured by the Rico company, sugar lumps, and family valuables. Karla is putting something into a paper bag, while her husband Šimon is leaning over, reading the label on a bottle. Maybe he is checking the "use by" date. They are all deeply engrossed in this odd activity. It resembles a family workshop or a stocktake in a general store.

The following shot is one that Jan Lukas decided to compose. He took a long time trying to find the right angle, until he eventually asked for a step ladder and stood on the bottom rung. Here Karla, Šimon and their daughter are already wearing their overcoats, and their belongings are packed into suitcases. Šimon has a scarf round his neck and is wearing a modern cap reminiscent of the kind favoured by his working-class neighbours in Žižkov. Vendulka is wearing knitted gloves, a three-quarter length coat, and a dress with a small check. At first glance they are an educated middle-class family. But there are disturbing details and so much tension. Šimon's hands are clenched. His wife and daughter have downcast eyes, gazing somewhere into

emptiness in the corner of the room. And of course there are the white labels with numbers and the Stars of David sewn onto their coats.

Shortly afterwards Jan Lukas pressed his shutter release a third time. This time his photo captured Vendulka on her own. A moment before he had rounded on her for running around the apartment and constantly laughing at something. There was such a hustle and bustle that she had the feeling there was some adventure in store for her. “Don’t you realise how serious this is?” Vendulka was taken aback by Jan’s words, and froze. Nobody had ever raised their voice to her before. A moment later the camera shutter clicked. It was the last ever photograph of Vendulka together with her parents.

Meeting in Columbus

The flight from Washington to here takes two and a quarter hours. The road from the airport is lined with tall concrete buildings and warehouses. These eventually disappear and there is more greenery, but the flat Ohio landscape looks bleak and featureless nonetheless. The dark band of asphalt stretches endlessly to the horizon, and it feels as if we are pushing it away from us all the time. When we eventually drive into a residential area of the city of Columbus I am surprised to find we have suddenly arrived. We stand in front of a spacious house clad in light-coloured stones and with a massive chimney. It is surrounded by mature maple trees and shrubs. As it is winter they are now bare, but I can imagine how pleasant it must be to enjoy their shade in the summer when everything is in bloom. So this is the residence of the woman I had been seeking for several years. And even when I finally found her, it took me several more years to convince her to give me an interview. Each time she refused. Now I am turning up unannounced. Maybe it's impertinent, but I want to give it a try. For the last time.

For me this story began six years ago, when I reached on the family bookshelves for a slim volume of photographs by the Czechoslovak photographer Jan Lukas. I looked at the photos one by one until I came upon a portrait of a girl in a three-quarter-length coat. A white label with the identification number 671 hung from a string around her neck and her coat bore a star of David. I was fascinated by that strangely distant, withdrawn expression: her face intimately lit and turned to the side. As if she was turning away from something. As I later discovered, her name was Hana Vendula Voglová. She was twelve years old when the photo was taken. Jan Lukas photographed her just before she left for concentration camp. He entitled the photo sim-

ply: "Before the transport". She would subsequently become an iconic symbol of the Holocaust, which journeyed to every corner of the globe, being featured on the front pages of newspapers in various countries, and is now exhibited at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Israel. It always interested me to know why this photo in particular. Because of the striking look of apprehension in her eyes? Or maybe because her pretty face, elegant clothes, and neatly brushed hair with that intimate lighting were in stark contrast with the horror and madness that she and her parents would undergo, along with millions of other Jews?

I couldn't tear myself away from that photograph. I wondered what happened after the shot was taken. Was the girl still alive? And if she was, how had she managed to survive? What might she look like today? She would be over seventy – how would her face have changed?

First I managed to find Jan Lukas's younger daughter Helena. She revealed to me the name of the girl in the photograph, and told me she lived in the USA. Their families had been friends after the war and she was well acquainted with her. At the same time she warned me that Vendulka never talked about what happened to her, neither to her, nor to her children. "My father always took great care that her name should never be mentioned in connection with his photograph," she told me. "It was something she didn't want." For the same reason, she refused to give me Vendulka's phone number, and only revealed her email address. And so I wrote to her for the first time in February 2014.

Dear Mrs Voglová,

You don't know me, but I take the liberty of invading your privacy and contacting you. My name is Ondřej Kundra and I have worked for the past twelve years for the weekly magazine Respekt, which was founded after the revolution by a group of dissidents associated with President Václav Havel. I am the political editor and chiefly write about Czech politics and corruption, focusing on investigative articles. I recently came across a book at home with photographs by Jan Lukas, whose work I admire. The photo that particularly stood out from all the others was the one depicting you. I keep on coming back to it and wondering what you must have gone through after it was taken, and what you must

have had to overcome. Some of my relatives were in concentration camp and my wife comes from a Jewish family, which is another reason why your portrait by Jan Lukas is of particular interest to me. Quite recently I discovered that you are living in the USA, so I decided to contact you and ask whether you might be willing to tell your story.

You could, of course, argue that the photograph speaks for itself. However, I fear that for the younger generation the Holocaust is simply past history already. They just register it as awful pictures from somewhere in the distant past. Maybe that is why anti-Semitic or generally xenophobic attitudes persist or are even being revived among some of them. For that reason I am convinced of the need to go on telling stories that recall that insane period when things were out of control, so that it should never be repeated.

With deep respect,
Yours,

Ondřej Kundra
February 2014

An answer arrived a few days later.

Dear Mr Kundra,
It is complicated, and I won't bother you with explanations. It is just that those unimaginable horrors that we lived through, and above all survived, left scars on us all that will never be healed. Some are able to speak or write about it, which is right, so that it is not forgotten. Others aren't capable – and I am one of them. As far as my photo is concerned, I always thought that it didn't have much to do with me, but chiefly with Jan Lukas, who risked his life to document some of the savagery of war.

I was twelve at the time, so I saw everything through the eyes of a child, which was maybe just as well. It was a long while before I discovered from a TV program here that only a few of the many thousands of children that passed through Terezín and went from there like me to other concentration camps, survived. I could only talk about the others with my mother or with those who had suffered a similar fate. I have read lots of excellent books written by people who were able to write.

Whatever I could tell with the best of intentions will not change the views of those who say that the Holocaust didn't exist. Please don't take offence. I know you mean well, but it simply left open wounds in those of us who were lucky enough to survive. Normal life is only possible for me if I avoid thinking about what happened. It's not possible to forget, but thinking about it as little as possible is something I can do.

Yours, Vendula Old

Every time I travelled to the USA in subsequent years, I would contact Vendulka Voglová but each time I received a warm but negative response. So I cheekily decided to simply turn up on her doorstep.

It is February 2017. A week ago I left for the USA to as part of a scholarship programme that happened to take me here to the capital of Ohio State. I would have regretted not attempting to contact her directly. I set off up the front path, imagining how she would probably react to finding me outside her door, and I prepared an apology in my mind. Will she be cross? Or will she receive me with indulgence? I pressed the copper button of the doorbell. Silence. No sound of footsteps, nor a call for me to wait a moment. Even when I pressed the bell a second time, no one came to the door. I spent a moment or two glancing around me and walking round the outside of the house, until I finally returned to the hotel disappointed.

I spent a few hours pacing up and down my hotel room. In a couple of days I was supposed to fly to California and I didn't know what to do. Several times I keyed Vendulka's phone number into my mobile (she had revealed it to me in one of her emails) and then erased it. Finally I called her number. After all, what is more impertinent – ringing her doorbell, or phoning her? After a while, a pleasant, deep voice was heard at the other end:

"Wendy Old, how can I help you?"

She once wrote to me that if I wanted to write about Jan Lukas and not about her, she might be willing to share her recollections of him. After she introduced herself on the phone, I reminded her of what she had said, and asked her to let me visit her. The other end of the phone fell silent, a silence that seemed

to me endless. “OK, seeing that you’ve considered coming this far...,” Vendulka conceded and fell silent against. “Come here tomorrow at four in the afternoon. I’ll be expecting you.”

I feared she would be severe and apprehensive, and keep her distance. But her reception was friendly. She was amiable, and she resonated calm, and even a kind of acceptance. She kept on apologising for her Czech, although there was no need. Lines had already transformed her face, but she looked young and elegant for her age. Her hair was tinted and carefully groomed. She invited me into the living room. Classical music was playing softly. There was a baby grand piano, and the walls were decorated with Impressionist paintings of Paris.

“It’s divinely peaceful here,” she said when we sat down at table. “I like it when it’s warm. I sit outside under the trees and read books or draw in my studio. I’ve also got a large library, quite a few of the books are Czech. I try to keep up that beautiful language. “You know,” she said, leaning back in her armchair, “in spite of everything I went through, I’ve had a beautiful life. That’s in fact why I finally decided to talk to you about it. In spite of the fact that I have so far kept a lot of things from my own children.”

A Prayed-for Baby

> In the ideal world that we can all imagine but never build, Czechoslovakia in those days was not the best solution for the nations living on its territory during the years 1918–1938. They demanded far more than the republic gave them, and they also demanded what the republic could not give them without jeopardising its existence. Masaryk didn't rule "with a rose as a sceptre" as the poet wrote, but after him a much harder sceptre was being prepared for Europe. In the light of what we now know about what happened next, we must conclude that it would have been advantageous if Masaryk's republic had had the opportunity to continue a while longer and develop in peace.
>
> History denied it that opportunity. It was in a dangerous location and it came to an end in an eruption a year after Masaryk's death. At the foot of the volcano it ensured its citizens a fairly protected and calm existence, at least until the lava started to flow. At a time before the advent of industrially organized murder, Masaryk failed to foresee the worst possible outcome. It was still not foolish to believe, as he did, that one nation cannot club another nation to death with hammers. When one nation really did attempt this, but with guns and Zyklon B gas instead of hammers, Masaryk was no longer alive.
>
> Jiří Kovtun, *Republika v nebezpečném světě*
> (The Republic in a Dangerous World)

Vendulka's birth on 27 December 1930 filled her parents with a sense of enormous gratification, as they had had been trying for a child for many years. Šimon was forty and Karla twenty-seven. They gave their only child the names Hana Vendula. Up to the end of the war she herself only used her first name; she became

Vendulka after the war when she wanted to start a new life and forget about the bad things in her past.

Both parents were from Jewish families, but tended to live their faith informally. They attended the synagogue irregularly but kept up Jewish traditions and culture. When Vendulka was born they were living in Karlovy Vary. Šimon had moved there on account of his work – he held a high post in the civil service as post office commissioner. The family could therefore afford to rent an apartment in a large house in the town centre, which was shared with their maid and nurse Emílie, and to own a motor car, which was still something enjoyed only by wealthier sections of the population.

Vendulka thus grew up in fairly luxury surroundings and a loving atmosphere that was almost over-indulgent. During her early years, her father taught her at home because he wanted her to get the best education. And when she later started to attend the local school, he arranged for a phone booth to be erected half-way to the school, from which she had to call home regularly to let them know she was alright. Her father's excessive attention was no doubt due to the fact that she was an only child, but his stubbornness also played a role. When he set his mind on something, there was no way of talking him out of it.

At the time the Vogls moved to Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad, in German) it was a favourite destination for enterprising and well-to-do Jewish families. The local Jewish community expanded quickly from the mid-19th century and in time constituted almost one tenth of the town's population. They contributed to the development of the spa and its amenities. Ludwig Moser's firm brought international fame to local glassmaking, and the Maier company did the same for Karlovy Vary porcelain, while the banker Alfred Schwalb helped found the luxury Hotel Imperial. As an international destination renowned for its tolerance, Karlovy Vary actually hosted two international congresses of the Zionist movement in the 1920s. Delegates from Jewish communities all over the world debated there the shape of their future state, and one of the congresses was chaired by Chaim Weizmann, who would become the first President of the State of Israel.

In spite of the Great Depression, economic development was maintained in the 1930s, and a number of costly projects were