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Priska

Priska Löwenbeinová's identity card

'Sind Sie schwanger, fesche Frau?' (*Are you pregnant, pretty woman?) The question directed at Priska Löwenbeinová was accompanied by a smile as her SS inquisitor stood, legs apart, looking her up and down with forensic fascination.*

Dr Josef Mengele had halted in front of the twenty-eight-year-old Slovak teacher as she stood naked and shivering with embarrassment on an open parade ground within hours of arriving at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. It was October, 1944.

Priska, at just under five feet tall, looked younger than her years. She was flanked by approximately five hundred other naked women, few of whom knew each other. All Jewish, they were as stupefied as she was after being transported to the concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland from homes or ghettos across Europe, packed sixty at a time into sealed freight wagons of trains up to fifty-five cars long.

From the moment they emerged gasping for air onto the notorious railway Rampe *in the heart of the Nazis' most efficient extermination complex, known collectively as Auschwitz, they'd been assailed on all sides by shouts of* 'Raus!' *(Get out!) or* 'Schnell, Judenschwein!' *(Quick, Jewish swine!)*

In confusion and commotion, the tide of humanity was shepherded by expressionless prisoner-functionaries in filthy striped uniforms who jostled them across rough ground as SS officers stood in immaculate uniforms, their attack dogs straining on their leashes. There was no time to look for loved ones as men were swiftly separated from women, and children pushed into a line with the sick and elderly.

Anyone too weak to stand or whose limbs were stiff from being squashed into an airless wagon for days was prodded with rifles or beaten with whips. Heartbreaking cries of 'My children! My babies!' hung ominously in the dank air.

Up ahead of the long columns of dispossessed sat two low redbrick buildings, each with an immense chimney spewing oily black smoke into a leaden sky. The grey atmosphere was thick with a putrid, cloying smell that assaulted the nostrils and caught at the back of the throat.

Severed from friends and families, scores of young women from their teens to their fifties were funnelled into a narrow corridor of electrified fencing like that which surrounded the vast camp. Shocked into

silence, they stumbled over each other as they were driven past the chimneys and along the lip of several deep ponds until they reached a large single-storey reception building – the Sauna *or bath house – hidden among birch trees.*

There they were unceremoniously inducted into the life of a concentration camp 'Häftling' *(inmate), a process that began with them being forced to relinquish any last possessions and divest themselves of all their clothing. Without a common tongue, they protested in a clamour of languages but were beaten or intimidated into compliance by SS guards with rifles.*

Driven naked down a wide passageway to a large chamber, almost all of these mothers, daughters, wives and sisters were then roughly clipped of virtually every hair on their bodies by male and female prisoners as German guards leered.

Barely recognisable to each other after the electric razors had done their work, they were marched five abreast outside to the roll-call area where they waited barefoot in cold, wet clay for over an hour before facing their second 'Selektion' *by the man who would later become known as 'The Angel of Death'.*

Dr Mengele, impeccably dressed in his tight-fitting grey-green uniform with its shiny chevrons and silver skulls on the collar, held in his hands a pair of pale-kid leather gauntlets with oversized cuffs. His brown hair slicked into position with pomade, he casually flipped his gloves left and right as he strolled up and down the lines to inspect each new prisoner and – more specifically – to ask if they were expecting a child.

When it was her turn, Priska Löwenbeinová had only a few seconds to decide how to respond to the smiling officer with the gap between his front teeth. She didn't hesitate. Shaking her head quickly, the accomplished linguist replied to his question in German: 'Nein.'

By then two months pregnant with her longed-for child by her husband Tibor (who she hoped was somewhere else in the camp), she had no idea if telling the truth might save her or condemn her and her child to an unknown fate. But she knew she was in the

presence of danger. With one arm shielding her breasts while her other covered what was left of her pubic hair, she prayed Mengele would accept her blunt denial. The SS officer with the suave looks paused for a second to stare into the face of the young 'fesche Frau' *before moving on.*

Three women further along, he roughly squeezed the breast of a woman who recoiled. When a few drops of breast milk betrayed that she was at least sixteen weeks' pregnant, she was – at a leftward flick of his gauntlet – yanked from the line and shoved into a corner of the parade ground to join a shivering cluster of expectant mothers.

None of those wide-eyed women knew then that one direction meant life while the other could mean something very different. The fate of those who were chosen that day by Mengele remains unknown.

Josef Mengele represented the greatest risk to Priska's young life thus far but still she had no concept of what she was soon to face. In the coming months hunger was to become her dreaded enemy, while starvation seemed the likeliest end to her suffering.

Hunger's cousin – thirst – would torment her just as cruelly during her time in the camps, along with exhaustion, fear and disease. But it was her pregnant body's gnawing, aching demands for nourishment that very nearly broke her.

Perversely, the one memory that helped Priska through some of her most ravenous pangs was of pressing her nose to the glass of a patisserie on her way to school before treating herself to a sugar-dusted confection such as a cinnamon *babka* with streusel topping. The recollection of breaking apart those flaky pastries as crumbs cascaded down her blouse in the cake shop in Zlaté Moravce summed up her idyllic childhood in what is now the southwestern corner of the Slovak Republic.

One hundred kilometres or so from Bratislava, the region where Priska grew up was known for gold panning, and the name of one of its rivers, the Zlatnanka, derives from the Slovak word for gold.

The town of 'Golden Moravce' was almost as prosperous as its title suggested, with an imposing church, schools and streets of shops as well as coffee houses, restaurants and a hotel.

Priska's parents, Emanuel and Paula Rona, ran one of the most respectable kosher cafés in town, a venue around which much of local life revolved. In a prime location on the central square, the coffee shop also had a pretty courtyard. Emanuel Rona had spotted the business for rent in a newspaper in 1924 when he was in his late thirties. Seeking to make his fortune, he took the bold decision to relocate his wife and children two hundred and fifty kilometres from their remote town of Stropkov in the eastern hills near the Polish border.

Priska, born on Sunday 6 August 1916, was eight years old when they moved, but she returned to Stropkov with her family whenever they could to visit her maternal grandfather David Friedman, a widower who owned a tavern and was a well-known writer of polemical pamphlets.

In Zlaté Moravce the family café was, Priska would later say, beautiful and always kept spotlessly clean by her hard-working parents and a flock of devoted female staff. It boasted a private function room her mother proudly called a *chambre séparée*, in which eight musicians in dark suits would play for the customers whenever she pulled back a curtain. 'We had great music and wonderful dancers. The cafeteria life was important then. I so terribly loved my youth.'

Her mother, who was four years younger and 'a head taller' than her father, was strikingly good-looking and quietly ambitious for her family. Having taken on the traditional Slovak female suffix of *–ová* after her marriage, Paula Ronová proved to be an excellent wife, mother and cook and was 'an extremely decent woman' who talked little but thought much. 'My mother was also my best friend.'

Her father, on the other hand, was a strict disciplinarian who conversed with her mother in German or Yiddish whenever he didn't want his children to understand. Priska, who picked up

languages easily from an early age, secretly understood every word. Although not zealously observant of the faith he'd been born into, Emanuel Rona appreciated the importance of maintaining appearances and took his family to the synagogue for all the major Jewish holidays.

'It was terribly important when I was young to behave decently because of the coffee shop,' said Priska. 'We had to be a good family, good friends and good owners, or clients wouldn't have come to the café.'

One of five children, Priska – named Piroska at birth – was fourth in line. Andrej, known as 'Bandi', was the eldest. Her sister Elizabeth, known as 'Boežka', came next, then Anička, known to all as 'Little Anna'. Four years after Priska came Eugen, known to all as Janíčko or 'Janko', the youngest child. A sixth child had died as an infant in between.

In Zlaté Moravce, the family lived behind the café in an apartment spacious enough for the children to enjoy separate bedrooms. They had a large garden sloping down to a stream that flowed the full width of it. An athletic, outgoing child, Priska frequently swam there with friends who also played tennis in their garden. Healthy and happy, with lustrous dark hair, Priska like her sisters was popular with the local children, who affectionately abbreviated her name to 'Piri', or sometimes 'Pira'.

'It didn't matter to me if they were Jews or Gentiles. I was friends with everyone the same. There was no difference.'

She and her siblings grew up surrounded by 'good women' who helped with the household chores and acted like surrogate mothers. The family ate well, with kosher meat presented 'elegantly' at almost every meal. Succulent roast dinners were often followed by desserts from the café. Priska had a sweet tooth and her favourite was the Viennese *Sachertorte*, a rich chocolate cake made with meringue and apricot jam.

Although they didn't study religion at school, the children were raised to attend prayers every Friday evening and to wash their

hands thoroughly before sitting down to an elegant *Shabbat* or Sabbath table with special candles and the finest linens.

Priska was one of only six girls in her class of more than thirty. Her sister Boežka was, she said, a 'true intellectual' who picked up languages effortlessly, seemingly absorbing them. Books held little interest for Boežka, however, as she was far more interested in artistic matters – especially needlework, at which she shone.

Priska may have had to work harder at her studies than her sister, but she was diligent and education soon became her passion. In her quest for a deeper understanding of the world, she also differed from her prettier sister Anna who preferred dressing up or playing with dolls. 'I liked that I had knowledge,' Priska admitted. She became fascinated by Christianity from an early age and often sneaked into the Catholic cemetery in Zlaté Moravce on her way home from school. She especially admired its imposing tombs and mausoleums and was always intrigued by a new 'arrival', making up imaginary stories about them and what their lives had been like.

Her mother Paula encouraged her daughter's thirst for education and was proud when she became the first Rona child to attend the local high school – the Gymnázium Janka Kráľa. It was an attractive three-storey white stucco building opened in 1906 opposite the cemetery and town hall. One of five hundred pupils aged between ten and eighteen, Priska studied English and Latin there as well as the obligatory German and French. Her siblings only attended the middle school, apart from her brother Bandi who went to accountancy school.

Competitive by nature, Priska won numerous academic awards and her professors were delighted with her progress. Their star pupil also enjoyed the attention of the boys in her class, who begged her to help them with their English and would congregate devotedly in her garden while she gave lessons. 'I have nothing but wonderful memories of Zlaté Moravce.'

Priska's best friend at school was a girl named Gizelle Ondrejkovičová, known to everyone as 'Gizka'. She was not only beautiful

but popular. The daughter of the district police chief, a Gentile, she wasn't nearly as studious as Priska, so her father called on Priska's parents one day to make them an offer. 'If Priska makes sure that Gizka completes her studies, then I will allow you to keep your café open as late as you like.' Nor would there be any extra taxes to pay.

And so it was that the fourth Rona child suddenly became vitally important to the modest family business. As long as Priska remained an unofficial tutor to her classmate she would guarantee that their café – above all others in town – would thrive. It was a responsibility she took very seriously and, although it left her little time to enjoy a social life, she adored Gizka and was happy to help. The two friends sat side by side in the same class and eventually graduated together.

After high school, Priska took up teaching and seemed all set for a career as a professor of languages. A keen singer, she joined a teachers' choir that toured the country performing traditional nationalist songs, one of which proclaimed proudly, 'I am a Slovak and a Slovak I will remain' – a tune she would happily break into throughout her life.

In Zlaté Moravce, she remained highly regarded and enjoyed being greeted first by whoever she met in the street – a traditional Slovak sign of respect. She was also wooed by a Gentile professor who called for her every Saturday night to take her for coffee or dancing, or for dinner at the local hotel.

There was little reason for Priska or her family to worry that anything might alter their comfortable way of life. Although Jews had long been persecuted across Europe, and had suffered especially at the hands of the Russians during the pogroms that dated back to the early nineteenth century, they'd settled easily into the newly sculpted nations of Europe after the First World War and the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. In Czechoslovakia they had risen to prominence and assimilated well into society. Jews not only played a key role in manufacturing and economic life but contributed to every field of culture, science and the arts. New schools and synagogues were built and Jews were at

the centre of café life. The Rona family experienced little anti-Semitism within their own community.

A severe economic depression after the First World War began to change the mood across the border in Germany, however. Adolf Hitler, who since 1921 had been the leader of the Nationalist Socialist German Workers, known as the 'Nazi' Party, accused Jews of controlling the nation's wealth and blamed them for its many woes. After federal elections in 1933, when the Nazis received 17.2 million votes, Hitler was invited into a coalition government and appointed Chancellor. His rise to power marked the end of the democratic Weimar Republic and the beginning of what became widely known as the *Dritte Reich* – the Third Empire.

Hitler's radical speeches denounced capitalism and condemned those who'd allied themselves with Bolsheviks, Communists, Marxists and the Russian Red Army to participate in revolution. Having written in his 1925 autobiographical manifesto *Mein Kampf* that 'the personification of the Devil as the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jew', he promised to eliminate Jews and other 'undesirables' from Germany in what he described as a 'thorough solution'.

Proclaiming his 'new order' to counter what many Germans saw as the injustices forced on them after the war, he encouraged brown-shirted stormtroopers to harass Jews and blockade or boycott their businesses. Cheered on by his indoctrinated Hitler Youth, his battle cry of '*Sieg Heil!*' (Hail Victory!) blared across the airwaves from Berlin. Within a relatively short time, Hitler appeared to be delivering on his promises and brought about such economic recovery that his support only grew. Bolstered by his success, his government began to implement a series of laws to exclude Jews from political, economic and social life. 'Degenerate' Jewish books were burned, non-Aryans were expelled from universities, and prominent Jews abroad – including Albert Einstein – were exiled.

As German anti-Semitism escalated, synagogues were desecrated or burned to the ground, sometimes with Jews trapped inside. The pavements of towns and cities glistened with broken

glass and the windows of Jewish businesses were daubed with the Star of David or offensive slogans. Gentiles, who were dubbed 'Aryans' by the Nazis were encouraged to inform on Jews and in an atmosphere of betrayal and mistrust, those who'd lived happily alongside each other for years and whose children had grown up together often found themselves being spat at in the street, beaten or arrested. There were willing spies everywhere, eager to denounce their neighbours in the hope of getting their hands on their property. Hundreds of homes were looted systematically by those who burst in and took whatever they wanted.

Native Germans were encouraged to inspect and then help themselves to the most desirable Jewish apartments, forcing entire families to leave their homes at short notice. It was said that the new tenants moved in before 'the bread from the oven was even cold'. Those evicted were only permitted to move into smaller quarters in the poorest districts, effectively banning them from the life they'd always known.

The physically disabled and mentally ill – Aryans and Jews alike – were declared 'unworthy of life' and many were sent away to camps or summarily executed. The rest of the populace had little choice but to conform to the imposition of Hitler's Nuremberg Laws, mercilessly enforced and calculated to further alienate Jews and others. Under what the Nazis defined as 'scientific racism' to maintain the purity of German blood, these regulations singled out the 'racially acceptable' and restricted the basic civic rights of 'Jews, gypsies, negroes and their bastard offspring'. The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour annulled all mixed marriages and the death penalty was applied to any Jew found to have had sexual relations with a German, in order to avoid 'racial pollution'.

Jews were stripped of their citizenship and anyone considered 'asocial' or 'harmful' – a nebulous category that encompassed Communists, political activists, alcoholics, prostitutes, beggars and the homeless, plus Jehovah's Witnesses, who refused to accept

Hitler's authority – was arrested and imprisoned in early *Konzentrationslager* or 'KZ', usually situated in former army barracks.

Aryans were prohibited from employing Jews. Through incremental changes, Jews were also barred from their own professions as lawyers, doctors or journalists and Jewish children could no longer be educated beyond the age of fourteen. Over time, Jews were banned from state hospitals and not allowed to travel further than thirty kilometres from their homes. Public parks, playgrounds, rivers, swimming pools, beaches and libraries were placed out of bounds. The names of all Jewish soldiers were scratched off First World War memorials, although so many had fought for the Kaiser in the conflict.

Ration cards and food stamps were issued but Jews were allocated half of the Aryan allowance. They were also permitted to shop only in designated places between 3 and 5 p.m., by which time most fresh goods had been sold. They were forbidden to enter cinemas and theatres and to travel in the front carriages of trams, only being allowed in the back where it was often crowded and hot. All radios belonging to Jews had to be surrendered at the police station and curfews between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. were strictly enforced.

Fearful of the new policies, thousands fled to France, Holland and Belgium seeking asylum. The nation that had been named Czechoslovakia since 1918 became another popular refuge. It not only enjoyed strong frontiers but powerful allies – including France, Britain and Russia – and Priska's family would have been among the majority who felt safe there.

Then in March 1938, as Europe trembled, Hitler annexed Austria in what was known as the Anschluss. Declaring German self-determination he demanded Lebensraum or greater 'living space' for his people. Later that year, residency permits for all foreigners living within the Reich were revoked. Then the Polish government unexpectedly declared that it would invalidate the passports of its citizens unless they returned to Poland to have them renewed. To facilitate this, the Nazis ordered that some 12,000

Polish-born Jews be rounded up and expelled. The Poles refused to accept them, leaving them in an unenviable limbo at the border.

Keen to negotiate peace so soon after a world war, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain led international talks that concluded with the Munich Agreement in September of that year. Without Russian or Czech involvement, the major European powers effectively gave Hitler permission to occupy the regions in the north, south and west of Czechoslovakia collectively known as the Sudetenland, and chiefly inhabited by German-speakers. In what many Czechs dubbed 'The Munich Betrayal', their country was left without strategic borders.

In November 1938, the vengeful teenage son of a family of Polish Jews who'd been forced from their home assassinated a German official in Paris. Exacting revenge, the Nazi high command ordered Reichspogromnacht, better known as Kristallnacht – 'Crystal Night' or 'The Night of Broken Glass'. In a single night thousands of Jewish homes, synagogues and businesses in Germany were targeted, at least ninety people murdered, and 30,000 arrested. In the ensuing months, Hitler's supporters continued to instigate anti-Semitic riots but in March 1939 the Führer invited Monsignor Jozef Tiso (the deposed Catholic leader of the Slovak people) to Berlin. Soon afterwards, Emil Hácha (the Catholic president of Czechoslovakia) also arrived. Both were given an ultimatum. They could either voluntarily place their people under Germany's 'protection' – they were also under threat from Hungary's claims to their border territories – or be forcibly invaded by the Nazis.

Tiso and his collaborationist government agreed to Hitler's demands almost immediately, and Tiso was installed as president of the newly minted and nominally independent Slovak State without further Nazi intervention, after collapsing from a suspected heart attack, President Hácha, sixty-six, agreed to the German terms the following day. There was, however, widespread resistance from his people; so, on 15 March 1939, German troops marched in and the Czech nation was declared the Protectorate of Bohemia and

Moravia. Hitler invaded Poland six months later. Then the Soviets invaded from the east a few weeks later, revealing their secret pact with the Germans. Britain and France declared war. Life for the people of Europe would never be the same.

Jews in the new Nazi 'client states' became outcasts overnight. *Juden nicht zugänglich* (No Jews allowed) was a common sign on many public buildings. Sometimes the signs read, *No dogs or Jews allowed*. When people learned of atrocities committed against those of their faith in Germany, Austria and Poland, they stormed the foreign embassies begging for visas, only to be turned away. Faced with a future that seemed inescapable, some committed suicide.

Priska and her family had no choice but to comply with the new regime and each new decree it implemented. It was the little things that hurt the most. The professor no longer called to take her dancing; the people who'd once greeted her first in the street stopped saying hello altogether or looked the other way when she passed. 'There were so many unpleasantries but one had to accept it automatically if you wanted to live.' Other friends, such as Gizka and another classmate whose family were farmers and continued to provide the Rona family with fresh milk, remained fiercely loyal. Some went out of their way to publicly greet their Jewish acquaintances and offer them every assistance.

With rumours of Jews being 'resettled' elsewhere against their will, people began to hoard food and other goods. They buried their valuables or asked friends to hide them, even though to be caught doing so carried a sentence of death. Those Jews who could, fled to the British-controlled Mandatory Palestine where there were hopes of establishing a future Zionist state. Priska's brother Bandi was amongst them and he went alone in 1939, claiming to have seen the 'writing on the wall'. Without even telling her, an early boyfriend of Priska's emigrated to Belgium and then on to Chile. He was wealthy and young and the couple had recently become engaged in preparation for an arranged marriage, but he simply disappeared.

The rest of Priska's family did whatever they could to get by. Her sister Anička had married aged nineteen in 1932 in the hope of avoiding a life of servitude in the family café. She and her husband had a son, Otto, but the marriage didn't last. After her divorce, Anna changed her name to the more Aryan-sounding Helena Hrubá and found a job working in someone else's coffee shop. Priska's brother Janko, who'd trained as an electrical engineer, was drafted into a Jewish labour battalion to become a '*Robotnik Zid*' or 'work Jew', wearing a distinctive blue uniform and given the dirtiest jobs. Boežka, a spinster in her thirties, stayed home sewing clothes for family and friends.

Priska, who was always proud of her Jewish nose – or 'nice proboscis' as she jokingly called it – was delighted to have Boežka's creations to wear, which made her feel less of a social pariah. 'I have never been a beauty but I took care to look good,' she said. 'I was always treated well by the people of my town, who liked that I was the honoured daughter of the coffee house.'

That honour was soon denied her. In 1940, her parents were banned from running the café they had carefully built up over sixteen years. With limited education and few other talents, they had nothing to fall back on. 'They lost everything,' Priska said. 'They were good people.' An Aryan or *Treuhänder* (trustee) who was put in charge of their business was unexpectedly kind to Priska and appreciated that she spoke English, French, Hungarian and German. 'It was important and valued that I could speak those languages,' she said.

Having been prevented from working, Priska and what was left of her immediate family decided to move to Bratislava, the new capital of the Slovak State on the banks of the River Danube. Priska's grandfather David Friedman, robbed of his family inn, fled his hometown of Stropkov and joined them. They had managed to hold on to a little money and hoped it might be easier for Jews to pass unnoticed in a large city, and they were right. At the time of the Nazi invasion an estimated 15,000 Jews lived in Bratislava,

comprising twelve per cent of the population, and they had assimilated well and encountered little anti-Semitism.

Although everything had changed under Nazi rule, Priska's family found an apartment on Špitálska Street and, by working privately as a teacher, she was able to once again enjoy the café life she'd known since childhood. She especially favoured the Astorka coffee shop where she rubbed shoulders with the intelligentsia, with whom she could chat in numerous languages. It was in Astorka one day in October 1940 that she spotted a slender man with a moustache sitting at an adjacent table. He was chatting to some friends of hers.

'He was talking very deeply and animatedly to my friend Mimi, who was a pharmacist. Suddenly she got up and came to tell me that he found me attractive.' Priska's bold admirer walked over and introduced himself. Tibor Löwenbein was a Jewish journalist of Polish extraction, fluent in German and French, who came from the town of Púchov in northwestern Slovakia. She always maintained that he was a little tipsy when they met so she told him she didn't like men who drank. Keen to impress her, Tibor promised never to touch alcohol again. He was true to his word.

He did however smoke a pipe and had a collection of forty, none of which Priska was allowed to touch. A meticulous dresser, her handsome suitor also owned forty shirts. As an aspiring author, Tibor was often to be found scribbling in little notebooks he carried. And he collected stamps – although Priska always said with a wry smile that after he met her, she became his only hobby.

Tibor was the only child of Heinrich Löwenbein and his wife Elizabeth, known as 'Berta'. Tibor's father owned a small farm. Wanting more than a farmer's life, Tibor moved to Bratislava and became a writer for the *Allgemeine Jüdische Zeitung* newspaper, covering sport and local politics. He also wrote a slim book entitled *Slovensko-Židovské hnutie a jeho poslanie* (The Slovak-Jewish Movement and its Mission), about being fully assimilated into Slovak life as a Jew.

Priska's husband, the journalist and author Tibor Löwenbein

When the Nuremberg Laws prevented him from remaining at the newspaper, the kindly Greek owner of the Dunajská Bank in Bratislava offered him a job as a clerk. Slender and well-groomed, with a pleasant way about him, Tibor had fairish hair and a pale complexion. He didn't look especially Jewish – which, Priska said, mattered then. He was so well regarded at the bank that he was sent to Prague and Brno on business, something that should have been impossible under Jewish travel restrictions. But his employer had important connections and Tibor seemed to be able to get away with almost anything. Being a journalist, he seemed to know everyone and people were always polite to him, a courtesy extended to the striking young lady on his arm.

Every morning on his way to work Tibor would walk Priska to the Astorka café where she enjoyed her morning coffee and cake. As he left he would stop and salute her, which always made her laugh. In the evenings after work they'd stroll along the banks of the

Danube, a popular spot for courting couples. There they would listen to the music being played on the street and watch the moonlight rippling on the water as barges, riverboats and ferries chugged slowly past.

For the first six months of their courtship Tibor wrote to Priska every day. He dubbed her his '*Pirečka Zlaticko*' (Golden One) and she called him 'Tibko', or more commonly 'Tiborko'. Smitten, she kept every one of his notes, some of which were brief but all were warm. Almost all of them survived the war. In one letter dated 10 March 1941, Priska wrote:

> My Tibko, I am so happy when I receive your letters, especially the long ones . . . Am in a hurry to let you know my great news! Namely, that I will have free time starting Thursday – so we will see each other four days in a row. What a luxury in this time of squeezed availability . . . You wished to know what I think of your letters. They are wonderful. I am amazed that you, who are so serious and nowadays pessimistic and seeing the current situation so dark, write such wonderful lines as you do . . . I think about you so much and know that you find solace in your books. I am a little jealous of their presence in your life while I am away – though I promise that it is temporary – please say hello to your books, which keep you valuable company without me. I am sending you a million kisses – Your Pira.

And in his reply, dated 12 March, Tibor wrote,

> My Golden Pirečka, I was extremely happy to read your letter. What happiness. In the dreary reality of everyday your words were like a ray of sunshine piercing the dark clouds. I am trying to express my thanks and joy . . . Probably am not able to do justice . . . ! As I am expecting to see you tomorrow at 4.30 p.m., at my place, and as I think about this joyous

occasion, I am also faced with thoughts of how destiny plays with us. This thought came to me as I realised that on our five months' anniversary we cannot be together. Thus I will need to leave the words I wish to share with you for the afternoon when I will finally see you . . . I cannot wait to hold you in my arms . . . see you tomorrow my darling . . . and till then I send you many kisses, Yours, Tibor.

Priska and Tibor marry in the synagogue in Bratislava 1941

The couple were married on Saturday 21 June 1941 at the twin-towered Moorish-style synagogue in Bratislava. The bride, who was twenty-five years old, wore a long white coat, a white pillbox hat, pearls and white shoes with a patterned dress. She carried a bouquet of white gladioli as she agreed to the *ketubah* or Jewish marriage

contract. Her groom, who was twenty-seven, wore a hat and smart suit with the fashionable baggy trousers of the time.

Priska's parents, Emanuel and Paula, who declared their son-in-law 'perfect', gave the couple their blessing and were delighted to have something to celebrate. Tibor's parents weren't at the wedding. His father had committed suicide at his farm near Püchov earlier that year, leaving his mother alone. Distraught, he'd returned home to be with her but then had to come back to Bratislava or risk arrest for being away from his registered address without permission. Priska and her parents became his new family.

It was a happy union and the newlyweds were well matched. 'We never even quarrelled once,' Priska said, describing her husband as 'sensational'. She liked that he spoke Slovak 'correctly', which many people didn't; often they blended it with German or Hungarian. 'He was wonderful to me and so impressed that I'd mastered all those languages. I have beautiful memories of my Tiborko. Such a good husband you couldn't wish for in your life.'

But the further reverberations of war overshadowed their happiness. On the day after their wedding, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union as part of Hitler's Operation Barbarossa to seize Russian territories. Still hoping for the best, and completely unprepared for what lay ahead, Priska and Tibor moved into an apartment at 7 Rybárska Brána, later known as Fischertorgasse, just off the main square of Hlavné Námestie. They lived there very happily in spite of the threats they continued to face. Eager to start a family regardless, Priska became pregnant straight away and the couple were delighted. With a child on the way, Tibor was even more grateful that he had a steady income. He even managed to keep his job in September 1941 when all Jews in Slovakia were faced with a list of nearly three hundred new rules to abide by, in something the Germans called the Jewish Code or *Židovský Kódex*.

This code, which officially defined Jews on racial grounds, reinstated a centuries-old practice of forcing Jews to wear humiliating

emblems that had been instituted in places as far afield as England and Baghdad since the ninth century. Everyone of Jewish origin was obliged to have their passports and other documents stamped with a large 'J', for the German word *Jude*. They also had to buy armbands or stars, which were cut from huge bolts of pre-stamped cloth made in the very factories where many had once earned their living. Each emblem had to be sewn front and back on to all outer garments, but was primarily to be worn over their Jewish hearts.

Public persecution of Jews increased with their new visibility. Not only were their shops and businesses continually vandalised or looted, they faced danger each time they left the sanctuary of their homes. Many of Tibor and Priska's friends paid huge sums of money to acquire false papers but they were at enormous risk if caught. Tibor's employer managed to secure his exemption from wearing a star and many other restrictions, but Priska had no such protection. Each time they stepped out together after curfew or went somewhere Jews were banned, she'd hold her handbag or turn the lapel of her coat in such a way that none could see her star.

Then, not long after the imposition of the new rules, Jews were instructed to leave the centre of Bratislava and move to the poorer suburbs. Priska managed to find a job teaching in a primary school twenty kilometres away in the small town of Pezinok. Tibor commuted into Bratislava each day, leaving at 6 a.m. 'He loved his job and then he had to work because I was expecting a baby.' Priska's parents, grandfather and sister Boežka managed to remain in Bratislava in an apartment on the banks of the Danube where Boežka continued working as a seamstress. And so this close-knit family continued to cope and to hope.

Priska taught at the primary school until the day the authorities decreed that all non-Aryans were forbidden from teaching Aryan children. Having said a fond farewell to her pupils, she insisted she was fortunate because an Englishman who ran a local language school invited her to teach there instead, and she was able to earn

more than before. 'I had options. I had very many private students who still came to me so it was as if nothing had happened. I did not suffer. They paid me and I had that to live on.'

Determined to help other families less fortunate than hers, she also continued to teach many of her former students for free, reading to them from German, French and English classics.

Then one day she lost her baby.

While the couple quietly grieved, daily life became steadily more difficult as the Nazi codes were ever more rigorously applied. The authorities forced Jews to catalogue all their silver, art, jewellery and other property, which they then had to deliver to local banks to be confiscated. Furs and their finest winter clothing followed. They were banned from keeping pets and had to deliver any cats, dogs, rabbits or caged birds to collecting centres, never to be seen again.

The Slovak State under Father Tiso became one of the first Axis partners to consent to SS *Aktionen*, deportations of Jews to new 'resettlement areas' or labour camps to aid the German war effort in the East. In return for the right not to lose its Aryan citizens to such places, the government agreed to pay five hundred *Reichsmark* for every Jew the Nazis deported across its border. In exchange, the Nazis assured the authorities that those 'parasites' that were 'resettled' would never return or make claim on any property they'd left behind. In the midst of this oppressive atmosphere, tens of thousands were rounded up by the Slovak *gardista* and other militia to be 'concentrated' at labour barracks within Slovakia – chiefly at Sered', Vyhne and Novaky.

Several thousand inmates remained in the new camps, manufacturing vital goods for the German war effort, but an estimated 58,000 were sent on to forced labour camps further east as part of what the Nazis called the *Osttransport*. By 'East', it was assumed the camps would be close to armaments factories within occupied Poland where inmates would work in return for food and shelter. Some were promised work gathering in the harvest or helping to set up new Jewish states.

Abandoned and helpless, the Slovak Jews resigned themselves to what seemed to be an increasingly bleak fate. They expected harsh conditions and general privations but prayed that once the war was over normal life could resume. Entire families volunteered to go with those sent ahead, thinking it would be better to remain together. Others promised to send money, letters and food parcels, fully believing that these items would reach their intended destination.

In March 1942, almost nine months to the day after her wedding and around the time that she had hoped to be celebrating the birth of her first child, Priska heard that her eldest sister Boežka had been rounded up in one of the *Aktionen* after the Slovak authorities agreed to supply 1,000 healthy single women. Learning of Boežka's fate, Priska hurried to the railway terminal in Bratislava to try to rescue her. It was an act that could very easily have cost her life. She found the crowded passenger train almost ready to depart but could see no sign of her sister amongst the sea of frightened and bewildered faces. 'I didn't know any of the *gardistas* but I begged them to let my sister go. They yelled at me and told me, "If you're single, get on the train! If you're married, then go home!" I was surprised they didn't just leave me (at the station) but they didn't.'

The feared Slovak *Hlinka* Guards in their distinctive black uniforms, many of whom had been trained by the SS, arrested Priska and locked her in jail overnight. Her distraught husband Tibor, who'd had no idea where she was, eventually received a message the following morning: 'Come and get your wife. She's a trouble-maker.' Tibor went to the police station and persuaded the authorities to let him take Priska home without penalty, but he was so angry at what she had risked that he refused to speak to her – although only for half a day, so upset was his young wife that she hadn't been able to rescue sweet Boežka.

Not long afterwards, Priska became pregnant again. Once more, even though their lives seemed to be disintegrating around them, the couple were overjoyed. Neither of them fully appreciated the

danger they were in as, during the following weeks, the authorities continued to carry out lightning raids on Jewish homes to round up people for the transports, a thousand at a time. Once, when Priska's parents heard jackboots in the hallway, they leapt from a window and managed to escape.

On 17 July 1942, they weren't so lucky. Powerless against the chain of command that presided over life and death, Emanuel and Paula Rona were snatched without warning. Priska didn't even know that they'd gone until it was too late. They were in their mid-fifties and she never even had the chance to say goodbye. As with her sister, Priska couldn't save them. Nor could she save the second baby she then miscarried. 'I felt then that I should go East too,' she said. 'Nothing mattered to me.'

Tibor discovered that his mother, Berta, had also been transported from her home near Püchov to a camp in Polish Silesia. She was elderly and alone. For all he knew, he was now an orphan. Priska learned from childhood contacts such as Gizka that most of the Jewish population of Zlaté Moravce had vanished too, including friends and relatives.

It no longer seemed to matter that her parents had been able to give Gizka their most precious things for safekeeping. The best friend whom she'd tutored through high school had risked her life by hiding the family belongings. With her parents and sister gone and her other siblings scattered, though, Priska wondered what a few bone china dishes or silver cutlery would mean after the war if there was no one left to sit at their Sabbath table.

Her sister Anna had been helped by Gentile friends to escape to the relative safety of the High Tatra Mountains, where she worked as a waitress under her assumed name and lived with their mother's brother, Dr Gejza Friedman, a pulmonology specialist at a sanatorium for sufferers from tuberculosis. He also took in his eighty-three-year-old father David Friedman, Priska's grandfather, who'd been left alone after her parents were taken. Anna's son Otto, aged eleven, was hidden by Catholic nuns. Her oldest brother

Bandi was safe in Mandatory Palestine. Janko had defected from his Jewish work unit and joined the partisans to organise raids on the *Hlinka* Guards and take part in actions aimed at undermining the pro-German government. They had not heard from him in months.

Rekindling her early interest in Christianity, Priska was baptised into the evangelical faith in the hope that it might save her. Tibor, who'd been raised in a more observant Jewish household, didn't believe it would. Both of them continued to observe the basic Jewish traditions. In spite of the huge uncertainty surrounding them – or perhaps because of it – his wife became pregnant again, but miscarried this infant as well.

By the autumn of 1942, the transports East had been halted by the Slovak authorities. The political and religious elite and the Jewish underground had formed an organisation called the Bratislava Working Group, which placed enormous pressure on Tiso's government once they suspected that the majority of the 58,000 Jews it had deported had been sent to their death. More than 7,000 of them were children.

For the next two years, after the Slovak government reconsidered its position and refused to deport its remaining 24,000 Jews, those left behind remained relatively safe. There were frantic efforts by the Working Group to save the Jews for ever by bribing key figures in the regime. They even negotiated directly with the SS and with *Hauptsturmführer* Dieter Wislieceny, the Nazis' Slovak advisor on Jewish affairs, offering millions of Reichsmarks worth of gold. Called the 'Europa Plan', these negotiations stalled when Wislieceny was transferred. In the interim, though, they had created an easing of anti-Semitic laws and a reduction in persecution, although a sense of foreboding still pervaded.

Thanks to Tibor's job and Priska's tutoring, they were able to return to Bratislava and moved into an apartment in Edlova Strasse. Although they experienced rationing and restrictions on when and where they could shop, they were well fed compared with thou-

sands across Europe. Whenever Priska's sweet tooth tormented her they would share a cake at their new favourite coffee house, the historic Štefánka Café.

Like most of their friends, Jewish and Gentile, they tried not to worry too much about the future and pinned their hopes on the war ending soon. By 1943, it certainly seemed to be swinging in favour of the Allies. The few radios allowed reported that there had been successful uprisings in Poland and that the Red Army was slowly taking control. The Germans had lost Stalingrad after a brutal five-month campaign. The Allies had seized Libya, forcing the Afrika Korps to surrender. Italy had declared war on Germany and Berlin was being evacuated of civilians. Could there be an end in sight, they wondered, or would the situation only worsen?

Priska and Tibor in Bratislava 1943

No one knew. Nor did they know what had happened to their loved ones, from whom they heard nothing. Rumours had been circulating in Bratislava for months about the camps Jews and others were sent to as word occasionally came back from some of the transports. People were being worked or starved to death or executed in brutal ways, it was said. News reports from America and Britain in 1942 claimed that Jews especially were being methodically murdered. These stories became wilder still after April 1944, when the Slovak prisoner Rudolf Vrba and escapee Alfred Wetzler emerged from a camp nobody had heard of in southern Poland to warn of mass exterminations involving the use of gas chambers and crematoria. The two men's detailed report on Auschwitz-Birkenau, complete with graphic illustrations, wasn't widely circulated for some time and many didn't credit it even then – although from then on, people became far more suspicious and avoided transports East at all costs.

Priska and Tibor couldn't allow themselves to believe the tales, which seemed too far-fetched to be credible. The general feeling among their friends was that such stories were either the ramblings of men driven insane by imprisonment, or exaggerated as anti-Nazi propaganda. In spite of all they'd endured, it was beyond their comprehension that Hitler really meant what he said when he'd promised to eradicate every human being of undesirable ethnic origin in order to create a master race. The Germans were, after all, one of the world's most cultured and civilised peoples. The nation that had produced Bach and Goethe, Mozart and Beethoven, Einstein, Nietzsche and Dürer couldn't possibly create such a monstrous plan – could it?

Maintaining their hopes of an imminent resolution to a war they didn't fully understand, the couple carried on with their lives as best they could. In the middle of June 1944, a week before their third wedding anniversary, Priska and Tibor decided to try again for a child. Two months later the relative calm they'd enjoyed for almost two years was shattered by the Slovak National Uprising, an

armed insurrection intended to overthrow the puppet state. Priska's brother Janko was one of thousands of ordinary citizens and partisans who did their utmost to end the fascist regime under which they were forced to live.

The violent rebellion began in the Low Tatras on 29 August 1944, and quickly spread until German Wehrmacht forces were sent in two months later to viciously crush it. Thousands died. After that, everything changed. The soldiers who'd been sent to wreak revenge quickly occupied the whole country under the auspices of the Gestapo, who moved in to impose order on those who'd dared disobey the Führer. One of the first tasks of the security police they brought with them was to force President Tiso to resume the transportations of the remainder of the Slovak Jews. Desperate to avoid such a fate, thousands went into hiding or fled to Hungary or other countries where they hoped they might be safer.

Trying to remain optimistic in the face of what seemed an increasingly inevitable outcome, Priska and her husband chose to stay in Bratislava where they'd successfully managed to avoid capture for so long. Each day they went undiscovered felt like a gift, especially when each week brought more good news about the war. Paris had been liberated, along with key ports in France and Belgium. The Allies had begun an airborne assault on Holland. Surely Germany would capitulate soon?

On Tuesday, 26 September 1944, the couple celebrated Tibor's thirtieth birthday. It happened to fall that year on Yom Kippur, the 'Sabbath of Sabbaths', a twenty-five-hour period of fasting for the Day of Atonement and the most holy of Jewish observances. Having scrubbed their hands, as was their custom, they sat together and enjoyed a meal cobbled together from whatever was available. They were not only celebrating Tibor's birthday but the new life Priska had been carrying beneath her heart for a little more than eight weeks. Together they prayed that this, their fourth baby, might survive.

Two days later, their hopes for happiness were shattered when

three members of the *Freiwillige Schutzstaffel* (Volunteer SS) – largely comprised of Slovak ethnic German paramilitaries – burst into their apartment and ordered them to pack their belongings into two small suitcases, together weighing no more than fifty kilograms.

'They were horrible,' Priska said. 'They were arrogant. They hardly spoke and I didn't say anything either . . . I knew how to stay calm in the face of adversity. I didn't start anything.'

On that fine autumn day and at a cost to the Slovak government of 1,000 Reichsmarks, Priska and Tibor Löwenbein were 'dragged' from their home and forced into the back of a large black van. They had to leave behind Tibor's collections of stamps, his pipes, shirts, well-stocked bookcase and precious notebooks containing years of writing.

The young couple were driven first to the large Orthodox Jewish synagogue in Heydukova Strasse. Kept waiting there for hours with scores of others sitting on the floor or on their luggage, they feared for their lives, while Priska was stricken by a bout of morning sickness – the first she'd ever suffered. Fighting waves of nausea, she clung to Tibor who kept telling her to remember their little one. 'My husband was just caressing me and saying, "Maybe they'll send us home, *Pirečko*." I was only thinking about my baby. I wanted that baby so very much.'

Later that day, they and 2,000 other Jews were transferred by bus to the small railway station at Lamač and then sent sixty kilometres east to the sprawling Sered' labour and transit camp in the Danubian lowland. A former military base, Sered' had been run by the *Hlinka* Guard prior to the uprising but then came under the supervision of SS officer Alois Brunner, assistant to Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi *Obersturmbannführer* (lieutenant colonel) and one of the chief perpetrators of Hitler's so-called 'Final Solution to the Jewish question'.

Brunner had been sent to Sered' to personally supervise the deportation of the last of the Slovak Jews after his success in over-

seeing a similar operation in Vichy France. Often seen wearing his favourite white uniform, Brunner is believed to have been responsible for the transportation of over 100,000 people to Auschwitz.

Jews being unloaded from cattle wagons at Auschwitz

Those who arrived in Sered' were herded into wooden barracks that were quickly overwhelmed by the sheer numbers. The prisoners' dehumanisation began with early morning roll calls, or *Appelle*, and a strict regimen of hard physical labour or domestic duties. Crammed into every available space, they were expected to exist each day on a half mug full of bitter 'coffee', some anaemic soup of questionable origin, and a little stale bread. Some of the more devout Jews used the hot water masquerading as food to wash their hands before they carefully sliced and shared out their pitiful rations.

On Yom Kippur, the day Priska and her husband had been observing in Bratislava, the Nazis at Sered' roasted a whole pig in the middle of the camp and laughingly invited the half-starved Jews

to share it. Not one is reported to have stepped forward, in spite of their hunger.

The first transportations East from Sered' started almost immediately after Priska and Tibor arrived by bus, as Brunner supervised the 'liquidation' of the camp in readiness for the next influx of prisoners. On 30 September 1944, the almost 2,000 Bratislavan Jews were marched from their barracks by Slovak and Hungarian SS officers in the middle of the night, and lined up in military formation before being shoved into freight wagons. Between eighty and a hundred people were squashed into each boxcar, with barely room to breathe, let alone move. Once the heavy wooden doors were slid shut, leaving them suffocating in the semi-darkness, the smallest of the children were passed over the heads of the others, to be held on the laps of those who had a little room to sit on a narrow plank at the back. The rest could only stand or squat.

There was no sanitation other than an empty wooden bucket and a tin can full of water, and each wagon was soon stinking and unhygienic as the pail slopped its contents at every jolt. Some tried to empty it out of the tiny window but a barbed-wire grille prevented it from being tipped up completely, so people were forced to defecate or urinate where they stood, soiling their clothes.

Without food, fresh air or water, the sweating, despairing humans were crushed against one another. Those who could see through narrow cracks in the wood called out the names of the towns they passed as they continued on their three-hundred-kilometre journey northeast. By the time they crossed the Polish border, some of the eldest prisoners recited the Jewish prayer for the dead and then simply shut down. Those who died were hurled off at stops along the way, making a little more room for the living. Like thousands of Jews transported from Sered' in abominable conditions during the final months of 1944, these 1,860 Slovak Jews realised that they were headed somewhere they would almost certainly be treated most harshly and might well meet their deaths.

Priska and Tibor were as fearful as everyone else, but still they kept trying to reassure each other that all would be well and they'd return home with their child. Priska especially was determined not to give up, because 'I liked my life so much.' She reminded Tibor that her ability to speak a number of languages would allow her to converse with the other prisoners and even the SS, who might treat her with a little more respect. She had a brain and she knew how to use it, she assured him.

Priska's faith was always important to her and she relied on it during those dark hours as their locomotive pulled them ever eastwards. 'Belief in God is the most important thing in the world. When someone has faith they must be a decent person and know how to behave. Every night I greet my God before I fall asleep.' Having been christened as an evangelical, she rarely thought of herself as Jewish, an irony that wasn't wasted on her as she and Tibor were treated without a shred of compassion on account of their faith. 'It is terrible what they did to the Jews,' she admitted. 'Horrible. Like animals. Men are men, and a man to a man has to act properly. They treated the Jews terribly. We were stuck in a freight train and . . . then thrown out of there. They behaved appallingly.'

The train journey lasted more than twenty-four hours as those squashed on board continued to wonder where they were heading and whether they'd be reunited with the loved ones taken from them two years earlier. Would Priska see her sister Boežka and her parents again? Might she be reunited with friends from Zlaté Moravce with whom she'd swum, sung and spoken English and German? Would Tibor be able to comfort his widowed mother at last?

An increasingly distressed Tibor didn't believe so and could hardly bear to see his wife suffer. Retching and without any water or fresh air, she struggled for breath in the dark, fetid wagon as he held her to him, kissed her hair and tried to console her. Hardly stopping to catch his own breath he spoke to her constantly,

reminding her to think positively no matter what, and to focus only on joyful things. Just as in his letters he had spoken of her 'light piercing the dark clouds', so he tried to keep her hopeful for the future.

As the train trundled remorselessly on, though, his courage began to fail him. If this was how they were being treated now, then what further cruelty awaited them at their destination? Holding Priska closer still, he openly prayed that she and his yearned-for baby would at least survive. Realising that this could be their last chance, the couple decided to choose a name for their child in that unlikeliest of places. Whispering, they picked Hanka (more formally Hana) for a girl – after her grandmother's sister – and Miško (Michael) for a boy.

Standing next to the young couple in the dimly lit wagon was Edita Kelamanová, a thirty-three-year-old Hungarian spinster from Bratislava. She couldn't help but overhear their conversation and she was moved. Over the growling of the train, Edita told Tibor, 'I promise that if your wife and I remain together, I will take care of her.' From a wealthy, educated background, Edita not only considered it her *mitzvah* or moral duty but hoped that if she did as she promised, then her prayers that she be saved and have a husband of her own one day might be answered. Tibor thanked the kind stranger as Priska, who recognised her accent, added softly in Hungarian, '*Köszönöm*' – thank you.

All cried out as the train jerked to a standstill at a central train depot at the border of Poland and the German Reich, where the prisoners were formally handed over to the new authorities. The doors to their stifling wagons didn't open and they had no idea what was happening as they waited in a siding. Then the train from Sereď gave a convulsive twitch and moved off again, until a few hours later it suddenly was buffeted sideways onto a dedicated rail spur and clanked violently to a halt at the railway ramp in the heart of Auschwitz II-Birkenau. It was Sunday, 1 October 1944. Beyond the sealed doors of their prison-on-wheels, the occupants of the

train immediately recognised the sounds of violence – men shouting and dogs barking – and knew then that they had reached their destination.

'Everything will be fine, my Golden One!' Tibor promised his wife moments before the wagon doors were thrown open with a tremendous bang. Shuffling forwards to the brink of they knew not what, he cried, 'Stay positive, Piroška! Think only of beautiful things!'