

A House Divided

a novel by Alice Horačková

Excerpt one: pages 449-454 (of 567)

Folding Skirt

Hanskarl did not go to Konrad's funeral, didn't see his cousin in the open casket, didn't see the sobbing *Bürgermeister*, yet he sensed that something had changed. His old man [Vincek] stopped calling him a palooka or a lazy bum the way he'd still yell at his half-brother Arnošt, and not only that, he barely even raised his voice at Mom or grandma now.

He said goodbye to Hanskarl in grandma's hay store, shortly before he was called back to the Eastern front. They hugged each other for a brief moment and Hanskarl got the feeling that his old man was suddenly emotional and that he'd rather stay home. After he left, Hanskarl packed up the few things he had there. He had to vacate the hay store before the German refugees from the East moved in there.

Now his problem was, how do you get from Benecko to Pomezni Boudy without being seen by anybody? In winter it was an even bigger hike than in summer. You could slide over there on a pair of skis maybe, taking it through Špindl, Výrovka and then up to Úpa, but you'd have to travel very light and then too all the mountain lodges were crammed with German soldiers and *Hitlerjugend*. And deserters didn't travel by train and if you took a "foot-train", you were liable to run into somebody who'd want to check your papers along the way...

Uncle Hanz figured that the best way to transport deserters was in his company's delivery truck. It ran on wooden gas and bore a commercial sign on the door, which Hanz had barely reworded since the Steiner days: „Save your wardrobe, wear Hollmann-Stebor, work clothes for any job.“

Hanz loaned the truck to Emil who drove to Benecko and got a shock there. Rushing to board the cabin was not only Hanskarl with a heavy backpack, but also Amálie in her holiday best and Zdenka as well as grandpa Honců with Arnošt...

„Wait a minute, what's gotten into you, people? We can't all go there!“ said Emil anxiously.

„Well, who else should traipse over there but me? He’s my brother and he owes me a lot,“ Amálie set her hands on her hips, this was not going to be subject to any discussions.

„Čejče, Málka, and when was it you saw him last?“ Honců asked slyly.

„Well, yes, it has been a few Sundays ago...“

„You see, Čejče. I say, it takes a man to read a man, we’ll crack a pack of cards like we did that day I led my daughter to the altar...“

„That’s it!“ remembered Amálie. “That was the last time I saw him! At Zdenka’s wedding!”

„But grandpa, you always dive into things headfirst,“ Arnošt objected. „And what if you run into a check point on the way? You’re going there on the pretext of doing business, wouldn’t it be better if I were in the truck with Emil?“

„But I don’t want Arnošt to come with us,“ whimpered Hanskarl.

„I should be the one to go. Hanskarl is my son, after all“ Zdenka joined the fray. „And I’ll explain it all to Zinnecker as a mother, as a woman.“

„Oh really? And what are you going to tell him?“ asked Arnošt. „Look Zinnecker, you were at my wedding, here is my son, he doesn’t feel like being drafted, will you hide him for me? What if he calls the cops on you? Or the Gestapo? He too believes in the German victory no doubt!“

Emil looked at Amálie: „Mom is right. If anyone can talk Zinnecker into it, it’s her. And if he tells her no, let’s just hope he won’t turn us in at least.“

They left early in the morning, never leaving the borders of the *Sudetengau*, and no one tried to stop them. They saw a lot of roes along the way, which had Emil thinking:

„Brother Vincek would have a field day poaching here...“ They parked the truck a little ways from Zinnecker’s cottage.

„And don’t even think about climbing out before we tell you to. Is that clear?“ Emil told Hanskarl for the third time already.

„And what if you stay there forever? It will be freezing here in the truck...“ whimpered Hanskarl.

„Handle it. In Russia, you'd handle it too, and over there you'd learn what it means to freeze for real," said Emil.

Zinnecker had wide shoulders and graying hair. He wore it in a pony tail on the back of his head, so it would fall in his eyes, and he reminded Amálie of her late husband a little bit. They both made their living cutting wood, after all.

Zinnecker invited his older sister and Emil inside without any ado. There was a hot stove, logs piled high beside it, a pot of spuds half covered with a cloth and a few cups on top of a kitchen cabinet. Amálie though noticed the food stains on the stove, saw that the spuds in the pot were yesterday's, if not older, and that tufts of dust lay in all the corners.

„Where's your wife?" she blurted out.

„Well, you know, Hedvika..." Zinnecker massaged his forehead, „well, she ran off, you see."

„What? Ran off? But why?"

„Down to the valley. Said it's too cold up here."

„Oh, for Christ sake, she finally realizes it now? Thirty years later?" Amálie slapped her hands together. She never did like Hedvika much.

Zinnecker sighed.

„And what about your daughter? She was too cold up here too?"

„Málka, you know how it is, daughters usually side with mothers. She never even shows herself up here anymore..." sighed Zinnecker again. He stepped to the cabinet, lifted three cups off the hooks above it and poured milk in them.

Amálie blew a gray hair off the milk and sipped it.

„Can I get you some spuds?" Zinnecker revived.

„No, but thank you very much," said Amálie quickly.

„Well, they're not like my Hedvika used to make them... But they're still all right," said Zinnecker, stuffing a potato in his mouth.

„No, thank you very much, really," said Amálie politely again. If her brother asks for the third time, she'll have to take one.

„Málko, and now let's hear something about you," the younger brother struck back, his mouth full of food. „So what wind blows you up here?"

„Well, you're right, it's not by accident that we're up here,“ smiled Amálie. „And Emil here has brought you something.“

Zinnecker glanced at Emil, as if he'd just noticed him being here, and frowned: „Isn't this the one who was in the Czechoslovak Legion?“

„Well, he's... the master glass blower,“ stammered Amálie to get off the subject. She didn't think her brother would have such a good memory.

Without a word, Emil unpacked a box. He had agreed beforehand that he'll let only his mother talk. There was a set of cut-crystal glasses inside.

Zinnecker peered at the gift in surprise. He started to realize that this wasn't just a simple visit. „Well and how's Vincek doing? Isn't he fighting in Russia right now?“ he said.

„He came home for a few days over Christmas. But he's back at the front again,“ said Amálie.

Zinnecker shook his head: „I'm too old for it already. And who'd bring all these logs down from here if I'd go and fight?“

Amálie nodded and said: „You see, I'd need you to help somebody. I mean somebody in the family. Like you helped Vincek back in the day.“

Once again, Zinnecker sighed. That was a good sign. He could have just as easily shown them the door.

„Málka, I.... “ he searched for words. He never was much of a talker. „And... so who is it anyway?“

„It's Vincek's son. Hanskarl is way too young and too green, he can't go to any wars.“

„Does Vincek know about this?“ Zinnecker looked at his sister sharply.

„He knows. And he also knows what it's like over there. He said he'll do all the fighting over there for Hanskarl too,“ said Amálie resolutely. She couldn't show any hesitation now.

„Málka, but all the boys from here went...“

„But I've already lost one grandson. They shot him up to bits, seventy planes against seven fighter planes, that's not a fight, that's suicide. *Selbstmord!*“

This wasn't easy for Zinnecker to listen to. He shook his head: „There's nothing but German cottages up here...“

„But your place is right by the woods, away from everybody. My grandson will not stir from here, only after dark maybe,“ argued Amálie. „And who washed your diapers back then, huh? Who fed you and babied you and carried you on her arms? Well, who? Who sang you to sleep when you were scared?“ she threw all her aces on the table. After their mother’s death, Amálie had to take care of all her younger siblings, that’s how it went in large families. But she had been the closest to her youngest brother who was still shaking his head right now.

„Málko, I did hide your Vincek in the Great War,“ Zinnecker piped in unhappily, „but now this is something else. You can see for yourself how I live here, I’m in the woods all day, I don’t have much of anything to spare...“

„It wouldn’t be for free,“ said Amálie and looked at Emil who was already rifling through his satchel. He pulled out a few packs of *Yosma* cigarettes and a gold pocket watch, which Hanz had once bought from Anton for fifteen marks.

Zinnecker reached for a pack and pulled out a cigarette: „Can I?“

Amálie nodded and sipped milk from the dirty cup while her brother took long drags from the cigarette in silence. Once he finished smoking, he weighed the gold watch in his hand: „How did you get ahold of something like this?“

„This is from Hanz to you. He got it through some banker in Prague. And it’s only an advance,“ said Amálie.

Zinnecker sighed again as he moved to the stove and then set the pot of the dry spuds on the table: „So where do you have this kid? Cause I don’t even recall ever seeing him.“

„You know what?“ Amálie sprung up from the table. „Let me clean up in here a little bit first!“

A little while later, Hanskarl was sipping milk from a spotless cup and drafts were no longer chasing tufts of dust around the room.

As she was leaving, Amálie handed Hanskarla canvas bag: „Take this, in case you were to run into some problems. These are the things that saved your father’s neck.“

Hanskarl peered into the bag. It contained a babushka head scarf and a long folding skirt.

Excerpt two: pages 488-494 (of 567)

A fatherless child

At Amálie's house, the Spiritists were through, the place was full of refugees from the East now. They slept in the back room, up in the attic and the late comers were crammed into the stable. There were only women with children from all the bombed-out corners of the *Reich*. One of them, a *Berlinerin* from Kreuzberg who survived the heavy February bombing of the capital, was soon to give birth to a posthumous child. She got pregnant when her husband came home for a brief vacation from the front and recently received an official notice that her husband sacrificed his life for fatherland while retreating in Pommern.

Amálie and Zdenka were just sipping a linden tee upgraded by a shot of pine-cone schnapps, which Benecko was never going to run out of, when a girl with long braids barged into the room.

„*Frau Hollmann*, help us!“ she screamed, startling Amálie.

„What's the matter?“

„*Meine Mutti!*“ repeated the girl several times. „*Bitte, bitte!*“

They rushed into the attic where the girl's mother lay on a straw mattress, tossing and turning violently. Amálie touched her forehead before laying her hands on her stomach. She was trying to gauge how open she was, and immediately decided that they will have to handle this without any help. The old midwife would never make it here in time.

„Breathe in and out, but properly!“ she ordered.

Zdenka ran off to boil water and when she brought up a steaming pot, she took the Berlin widow by the hand. This woman had to handle this all by herself, just like she had to once, though it didn't seem as if she fully realized it yet. She pushed with all her strength, fulfilling Amálie's instructions to the letter.

„It'll be any minute now,“ Zdenka calmed her down.

„I see the head! Do you want to feel it?“

The *Berlinerin* hesitated, could she really touch her baby already? Wouldn't that be a bad sign? Surely, it's all covered with blood...

In the end, she reached down there. And it was true, she did touch something hard and also wet and silky there. That must be the baby's hair!

„Is it dark... or blond?“ she asked feebly.

„Black as coal,“ chuckled Amálie. „So one more push! A good one! And it will be over!“

„Like... my husband.“

Amálie somehow managed to hide how moved she was. She knew what it's like to give birth to a baby that has no father. But her last little girl did not make it.

The *Berlinerin* nodded and, completely exhausted, summoned her strength to push once more.

„It's a boy!“ Amálie shouted happily.

„*Ein Bubi?... Echt?*“ repeated the *Berlinerin* as if she couldn't believe it.

The tiny boy was shrieking and kicking his tiny legs. Amálie cut the umbilical cord and carefully set the baby on the woman's belly. The *Berlinerin* began gently stroking and soothing it: „Shh... Shh...“

The baby boy stopped crying and started listening. He took a moment to get used to the enormous space around him and then crawled awkwardly over his mother's belly. She gently guided him to her breast. The boy immediately started to suck on it.

And Zdenka thought, how simple it all is sometimes.

Happiness

Emil was stuffing himself with *zelňáky*, fried sauerkraut patties, which Žeňa learned to make according to her mother-in-law's recipe, and had even slightly improved on it. He was washing it down with whipped butter milk. It's been a long time since he'd felt so happy.

Just then Hanz walked in the door. He was as carefully dressed as always, but Emil saw right away he wasn't his usual self. Maybe it was in the way he said hello.

„I'm not disturbing you, am I?“ asked Hanz gingerly.

„Not at all! So what brings you all the way here from Kojetice?“

„Oh, I had a meeting with Lída here, so I thought I'd drop in on my brother too...“

„So sit down then! You just caught us celebrating, right, Žeňa?“ Emil turned to his wife.

„Celebrating? What's there to celebrate these days?“ said Hanz softly.

„We're going to have a bigger family!“ shouted Emil, his eyes shining brightly. It was only yesterday night that Žeňa gave him the incredible news. She was pregnant for the second time in her life, despite her age, despite the war, despite everything. „It's a real miracle! Miracle! Nothing short of it.“

A miracle would be if Germany still won this war, Hanz thought, but out loud he said:

„Congratulations.“

And he looked from Emil to Žeňa and from Žeňa to Emil. The philosophical Emil, God's simpleton, who knows with whom Žeňa had conceived this baby in her old age... He wouldn't even be surprised if it were with some partisan or some camp escapee, now that the war was almost over, everybody wanted to be a hero. Hanz heard that people were hiding enemies of the *Reich* in sheds, barns, they were even helping them dig underground shelters in the woods and giving them food while barely having anything to eat themselves. He failed to comprehend how come the Gestapo hadn't even managed to liquidate the parachutists, which had been dropped off near Vrchlabí.

„I came to say goodbye,“ he said.

„Oh, I see,“ said Emil, as if he were still deciphering the meaning of the words, but his mood was shot.

Hanz dropped his voice: „You know... I thought... Could I leave something here with you?”

„Leave something here?”

„Well, like hide it here. Assuming that you’re not planning to go away yourselves...”

„No, we’re not planning to go anywhere,” said Emil calmly, „we’ll stay right here, where would we go? So what’d you wanted to hide here?”

„Some valuables,” Hanz pulled out a leather satchel, full of gold ingots and jewels. He believed it was best to spread things around different places. And he could depend on Emil, family was family.

„Well, fine,” Emil reached for the satchel and dropped it thoughtlessly right beside his plate.

„Thanks. Oh, and the motorcycle too,” Hanz added nonchalantly.

„But what are you going to ride off on?” Emil asked, surprised.

„I still have the car,” said Hanz.

„Oh,” said Emil and he bit into a *zelňák*.

Hanz was still trying to decide if his brother’s grunt had signaled agreement or rejection when Žeňa spoke up. She said something in Russian, real fast and real loud.

And that’s that, flashed through Hanz’s mind. He’ll have to go back to Lída, even though he didn’t want to ask this favor of her, for what if she were suddenly to get married? He trusted Lída, he trusted her absolutely, but who could vouchsafe for her husband?

„Žeňa wants me to ask you something,” fidgeted Emil.

„So go ahead and ask me,” said Hanz.

„Well, she wants... she wants to know what happened to all those people in the transports.”

Hanz squinted at his brother in surprise, what did he have to do with some transports?

„Well, do you know what I mean? Those transports...” Emil insisted.

Hanz knew very well what transports Žeňa had in mind. He gave a shrug: „They go to some camps.”

Emil translated for Žeňa.

„And in those camps...?” asked Emil.

Hanz scrutinized Žeňa, trying to gauge how much she knew. She had to know something, or else she wouldn't be asking him. But clearly she didn't know everything, because she wouldn't be asking at all, if she did. He didn't hold it against her, he was always cutting deals, he understood all sorts of trades: right now he wanted something from his brother and his brother wasn't about to give it to him for free.

„They work. Or die,“ he said.

Žeňa spoke up in Russian again, talking for a while.

„And what about the old people? And the children? All those who can't work?“ Emil translated.

Hanz suddenly remembered how he returned from Berlin, how he came back from Heydrich's funeral and how the women in the factory insisted that they'd heard it all, all those shots, how they'd smelled the smoke in the air, how they could just feel Lidice being wiped off the face of the earth. Back then, Hanz didn't believe it, not that the Nazis wouldn't be perfectly capable of such a thing, but he didn't believe the women could have sensed it, not while Lidice lay thirty kilometers from Kojetice as the crow flies... „I don't know. And I don't even want to know,“ he finally said.

He wasn't lying, but he wasn't telling the whole truth, either, and this was enough for Žeňa. She nodded to Emil and rose from the table.

„Do you know what the best thing would be now?“ Emil told his brother. „If you took that bike and bricked it up somewhere.“

Adolf

Zdenka went to look how the *Berlinerin*'s baby was doing. Doesn't his tummy hurt?

Does the mother have enough milk for him? Did her nipples get infected?

It brought back all the trouble she went through with Arnošt and all the irritation she felt back then. She really regretted now being such a bad mother to him.

When she entered the attic, the woman was dozing. She lay on her side on the straw mattress, with the baby boy beside her. He had beautiful blue eyes and stared at the ceiling, was he seeing something there already? She didn't want to wake up the woman, so she just quietly set a cup of sweet curd and a piece of bread beside the mattress and stroke the tiny boy on his velvety cheek.

The woman opened her eyes.

„Name?“ asked Zdenka.

„I wanted to call him Karl after my husband, in fact I was totally sure of it, *ja, ganz sicher*,“ the woman made a pause, „but he's going to be Dolfi. Adolf.“

Zdenka was startled: „Adolf?“ Of all the names in the world, this was by far the worst choice. Sure, Vincek's younger sister was Adolfinia too, but she got that name a long time ago, long before...

The woman turned over on her back and looked Zdenka in the eyes: „*Hitler ist tot, nicht wahr?*“

Zdenka took a brief moment to think how to break this to the *Berlinerin* as gently as possible. There were still all sorts of rumors flying around. Hitler had flown off, Hitler escaped through the sewers, Hitler donned the uniform of a regular German soldier, Hitler swam across the Spree River... Zdenka herself had a hard time believing this news, but then they announced it from London, Moscow and America too, so she said:

„Yes, Hitler is dead.“

„How?“ the woman blurted out, „how did he die?“

Zdenka searched her memory for a moment, how do you say this in German, no, *Mord* wasn't it.

„Selbstmord,“ she finally answered. She was going to say it like it was, does the *Berlinerin* spare her in any way? Doesn't she realize how much people in this village hated Hitler? How could she not sense it?

The woman turned back on her side again.

„Danke,“ she said, motioning toward the cup and the bread.

„Gerne,“ Zdenka smiled and started to leave.

„He'll have a state funeral,“ the woman spoke to her back.

„Was? What's that? “

„Hitler will have a state funeral. Once everything settles down again,“ repeated the woman stubbornly, „just you wait and see.”

„I'm not so sure about that,“ said Zdenka. She wondered what did the *Berlinerin* mean when she said that they would still see.

„Not everyone can do something so great for his nation,“ whispered the woman, shutting her eyes.