

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

Artikel in: Liberty.

Tragedy's Children.

Mann, Erika

1945-12-22

Nutzungsbedingungen

Bei zahlreichen Dokumenten auf monacensia-digital.de sind die Urheberrechte bereits abgelaufen. Sie sind gemeinfrei und dürfen ohne weitere Rücksprache mit der Monacensia weiterverwendet werden.

Bei den Dokumenten, bei denen noch Urheberrechte bestehen, müssen für eine Weiterverwendung stets die Rechteinhaber*innen angefragt werden sowie eine Publikationsgenehmigung der Monacensia eingeholt werden. Das Zitatrecht bleibt hiervon unberührt.

Zur Erteilung einer Publikationserlaubnis wenden Sie sich bitte an:

Monacensia im Hildebrandhaus

Literaturarchiv

Adresse: Maria-Theresia-Straße 23, 81675 München

E-Mail: monacensia.literaturarchiv@muenchen.de

Terms of use

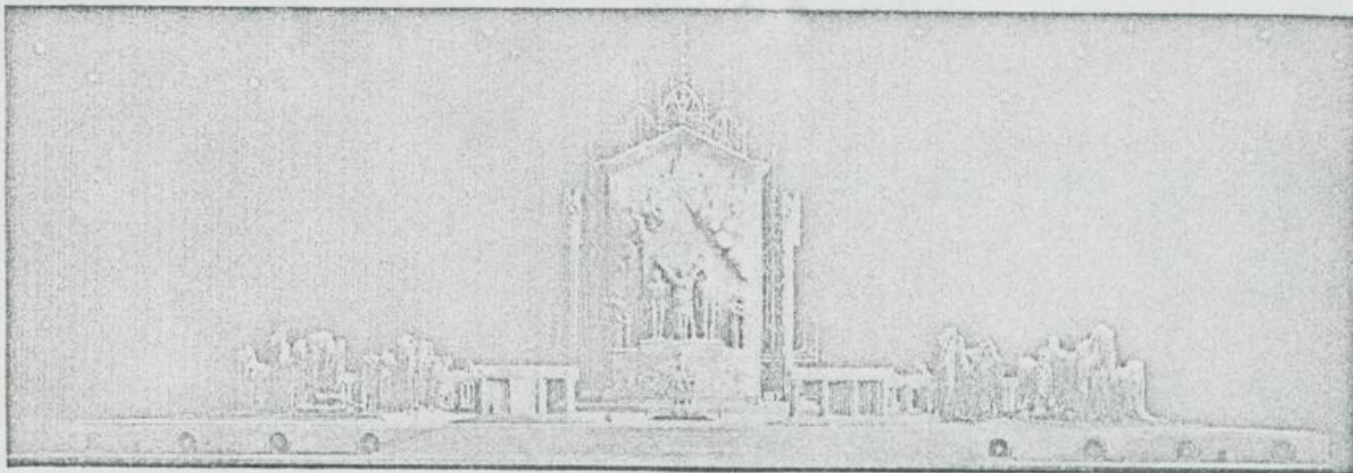
The copyrights for numerous documents on monacensia-digital.de have already expired. They are in the public domain and may be reused without further consultation with Monacensia. In the case of documents for which copyrights still exist, the copyright holders must always be contacted for further use and publication permission must be obtained from the Monacensia. The right to quote under copyright law remains unaffected by this. To obtain permission for publication, please contact:

Monacensia im Hildebrandhaus:

Literaturarchiv

Address: Maria-Theresia-Straße 23, 81675 München

E-Mail: monacensia.literaturarchiv@muenchen.de



To commemorate the spirit which wantonness could not destroy, this memorial altar will be erected near Lidice.

Tragedy's Children

BY ERIKA MANN

The strange story of a mysterious man whose self-appointed quest is to find the lost children of Lidice who were sold into slavery when the Nazis murdered their fathers and burned their village

SLAVA LEDERER is not a handsome fellow. He is forty, dark, somewhat smaller than medium sized, and there is nothing particularly attractive about his haggard face. Yet the women of Krocchlavy-Kladno in Czechoslovakia are attracted to him as to no other man. No sooner is his battered little car heard in the streets than they rush out and implore him to stop. Some weep at the sight of him. Others wave sheets of paper covered with notes. Snapshots and hand-drawn maps are pressed into his hands.

Slava listens, nods, shrugs his shoulders, and finally gets out of his car and enters a neat-looking house. The women follow. There are about fifty of them. Sometimes there are more. They all look at Slava as if he were able to turn wretchedness into wealth and misery into bliss.

"I shall find them," says Slava. "I shall surely bring them back to you."

For this is the task he has set for himself: to return to their widowed mothers the children who were sold into German slavery on July 13, 1942. He has found eight already. One hundred and two are still missing.

The auction took place in the Polish city of Lemberg. Prices varied. Blond, blue-eyed youngsters in their teens brought as much as fifty marks each. Smaller and less Nordic-looking children sold for between twenty and thirty. Some, who were old enough to work but too dark to please, sold for a mere fifteen marks, while others—the smallest and darkest—failed to attract any buyer and were left to their fates.

The SS man in charge of the auction was one of those entrusted with the liquidation of Lidice. "A tidy man," says Slava, "and a fairly good book-keeper. But most of the addresses we found on him are out of date. With millions of Germans on the move all over eastern and central Europe, his customers are hard to locate. I shall find them, though."

Slava is childless and is not from Lidice, yet for months he has been searching for the missing children, none of whom he has ever seen except in photographs. The car he drives was loaned to him because of his failing health and the urgency of his mission. After many difficulties he finally obtained an official windshield sticker which proclaims in Czech, Russian, and English that Slava Lederer, citizen of Czechoslovakia and native of the city of Pilsen, is to pass freely for the purpose of recovering the lost children of Lidice.

It was in a café in his home town that I first talked to Slava. He had a numbered button on his coat lapel. "That's me: Partisan Number Nineteen," he said.

(Continued on page 91)



Cocky Nazi officers stroll through the rubble that was Lidice. The indomitable Czechs spirited out this official German Army photograph.

TRAGEDY'S CHILDREN

Continued from Page 28

He didn't look much like a partisan. He is shy and not the aggressive type. He wasn't eager to tell me his fantastic story. I got it bit by bit that evening and throughout the following day as we drove to Kroch-lavy-Kladno and Lidice.

Before the war Slava Lederer was a fairly successful business man. He was also an ardent Czech patriot, and that got him into trouble. The Gestapo came for him late in 1939. "You've been listening to the BBC," they told him.

The Gestapo prison where he spent three months was bad enough. Then he was moved to Theresienstadt, near Prague, the "model concentration camp," and one of the most infamous establishments ever set up by the Germans.

"SOME of the barracks," Slava said, "were clean and pleasant, with decent furniture and flowers on the windowsills. But nobody lived there. It was only when visitors came to inspect the camp—Red Cross people or foreign dignitaries—that some of us were driven into those neat little houses. Whoever dared to indicate that he didn't belong there was doomed. So were those who either refused to 'go shopping,' or who failed to 'shop' convincingly. We were quite rich at Theresienstadt. A lot of special money was printed for us. And there were quite a few lovely shops. As soon as an important visitor arrived, 'business' picked up. Half crazy with fatigue, cold, and starvation, we'd rush about, buying bread and meat, warm clothes and good shoes. I don't know what was more agonizing, the short time during which we possessed the dream stuff, or the moment when it was taken away. For it always was—all of it."

Theresienstadt was not an extermination camp, but 35,000 died while Slava was there.

One night in July, 1942, he and thirty-nine other prisoners were awakened.

"Shovels," they were told. A truck took them away. They were not told where they were going, but when the truck stopped, some of them recognized Lidice. SS. men were at work burning its eighty-nine houses and its little church.

"The terrible screaming and weeping didn't come from the flaming buildings," Slava said. "It came from the schoolhouse that had so far been spared. The women and children were locked in there. The men were all dead.

"When we saw their corpses, we couldn't look at one another. None of us wanted to read his own thoughts in the other fellow's face. The grave we were ordered to dig was to be twelve meters long, eight meters wide, and two meters deep. It could hold our dead bodies, too.

If you're away - let Flowers-by-Wire take your place at the tree!



When you're in another town on an occasion you want to remember, say it the most beautiful way of all—with Flowers-by-Telegraph!

In any event—wire Flowers

As an example, you can send a \$5.00 bouquet from Detroit to:

PLACE	Price of FLOWERS	+	Av. Cost of WIRE
BAKERSFIELD for	\$5.00	+	63¢
NATCHEZ	"	"	60¢
SALEM	"	"	63¢
TORONTO	"	"	50¢
LINCOLN	"	"	60¢
AUGUSTA	"	"	53¢
KNOXVILLE	"	"	53¢

NOTE: These are just a few examples of how reasonable it is to send flowers by wire.



FOR BIRTHDAYS, HOLIDAYS, ANNIVERSARIES—FLOWERS-BY-WIRE

Just follow these 3 simple steps:

- 1 Go to any florist with the Florists' Telegraph Delivery Association seal on his window.
- 2 Tell him kind of flowers and amount you wish to spend.
- 3 He does the rest! He wires your order and message for card to FTD florist in other town—who then delivers the flowers.

It's easy — just be sure florist has FTD seal (shown at left) on his window.

FLORISTS' TELEGRAPH DELIVERY ASSOCIATION

484 East Grand Boulevard, Detroit 7, Michigan

There were 185—among them a boy of twelve, a boy of five, and two dogs. Although we were made to work fast, it took us thirteen hours to dig the grave. When it was ready, we, too, expected to die."

No one knows why the men from Theresienstadt were spared at Lidice. Slava, for one, was marked for extermination. After three years at the "model camp," he was sent to Auschwitz, and Auschwitz meant death.

"I didn't think I cared," he said. "By the time I got there, all those I loved—my father, my brother, and my two sisters—had been deported and killed at Warsaw."

He paused.

"But the children of Lidice," he said finally, "they were still alive, though one of the SS. wanted to kill them. The others said they were as good a value as the sheep and the goats and they'd better be sold. So the bloodthirsty one was appointed chief auctioneer. I couldn't get those children out of my mind."

"You mean that you escaped from Auschwitz?" I asked.

Prior to its liberation by the Red Army, nobody had ever left the extermination camp alive.

Slava rolled up his sleeve. The number burned into his skin was duplicated in the Auschwitz records and identified Slava Lederer as prisoner No. 170521.

A GREEDY guard had helped him escape. Slava was neither a poor nor a shortsighted man. Anticipating his arrest by the Gestapo, he had distributed his modest fortune, 250,000 crowns (about \$10,000) among his friends in Pilsen. He promised his torturer 245,000 crowns. A letter of instructions was delivered to his friends. The money was reassembled and surrendered to the guard at Mährisch-Ostrau, the appointed meeting place.

"On April 5, 1944," said Slava, "I left Auschwitz in the uniform of Hitler's SS."

Up to the day of his departure, 3,500,466 prisoners had been gassed at Auschwitz.

Slava went into hiding—a man without papers, a fugitive sought for immediate extermination. However, during the next two months he made six visits to Theresienstadt and smuggled in a radio receiver, nine Browning machine guns, and 200 letters.

By that time the Nazis had transferred their most secret and incriminating papers from Berlin to Theresienstadt, because the "model camp" was less exposed to Allied bombings and inconspicuous enough to be made the Reich's central office of espionage.

The papers were stored in mirror-paneled rooms and watched over by both guards and dogs. The guards were forbidden to touch the files, but the dead tell no tales, and the prisoners were considered as good as dead. On two occasions Slava changed clothes with one of the in-

mates and, broom in hand, turned up in the mirror suite.

"I spent sixteen hours," he said, "wiping the floors, dusting the chests, and reading the files."

Every Nazi agent abroad and every "suspect" in occupied Europe had his or her individual dossier. Records of Jewish, Polish, Yugoslav, and Czechoslovak suspects were lumped together and classified as "especially watchworthy."

Slava learned who among his friends belonged in this group and acted accordingly. Many had been arrested. He found out where they had been sent. Many had died. They, too, were listed. Their families were rarely informed. Wherever he could, Slava told them.

The women of Lidice, he noticed, had all been interned. But nowhere could he find any trace of the children.

Late in July, 1944, following the Allied invasion of Normandy, revolutionary upheavals broke out in Slovakia.

Slava decided to form a group of partisans. He remembered a number of fellow prisoners from Auschwitz. If their dossiers were correct, they had not yet been gassed. They would make magnificent fighters, he believed, and ought to be freed at once.

*****★*****

"When you're at war," says a character in Thornton Wilder's play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, "you think about a better life; when you're at peace, you think about a more comfortable one."

He had no money left with which to bribe the greedy Nazi guard, so he tried a new approach.

"Look here," he told the guard, "dozens of people know about our old deal and are advised to talk if I shouldn't return. If, on the other hand, you assist me now, we shall remain quiet, but once victory is ours—and it will be, soon—I shall testify in your favor and you'll be the only Auschwitz trooper who has nothing to fear."

The scheme worked. One of the men whom Slava had meant to liberate was killed by another guard. The remaining nine escaped.

The Slovak revolution failed, but the partisans kept fighting. Number Nineteen and his group specialized in sabotage.

They had, as Slava puts it, "an exceedingly nice time." At night, in their woody hideouts in the Beskids Mountains, they had their "parties." Guided by small fires, the "guests" would fall from the skies—Russian parachutists, their pockets bulging with dynamite. While Slava and his outfit—by now 800 strong—longed to join the Red Army, the Russians insisted they remain behind the German lines.

When Slava scorched the Roederstein factory in Sbraslav, near Prague, Marshal Zhukov was on his

way to Berlin and the Wehrmacht was running short of supplies. It needed the machine parts and electrical equipment that Roederstein produced.

"I burned it all," says Slava. "I got there at midnight. At 1 A.M. the place was on fire, just five hours before the stuff was to have left for Berlin."

His day's mission completed, Partisan No. 19 planned to hide out in Prague. When he arrived, however, fighting was in full swing and Slava found himself in the thick of it.

"To be in on the liberation of Prague was no mean break," he said.

He fell silent. Except for the interruption at Krocchavly-Kladno we had been driving all day. Both driver and car seemed thoroughly tired. We came to a sudden stop.

"What's this?" I asked.

"This," said Slava, pointing at nothing in particular, "is Lidice."

NOT a house, not the faintest sign of murdered life was to be seen. Perhaps the grass grew a little more thinly here than elsewhere, and the trees which once lined the village street looked more forlorn. Behind and above them a slim wooden cross stretched its arms, a barren Calvary, bearing the crown of thorns but embedded in flowers.

"Here they lie," said Slava. "The cross is new. So, of course, is the stone. The Germans wouldn't let anyone go near the grave. But somehow there are always flowers."

The tombstone bore this inscription:

"To the men of Lidice, victims of Fascism, from the soldiers and officers of the Fifth Russian Army and from General Pankova, their commander."

It was getting dark. Slava translated the words for me without looking at the stone.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'll be off for Upper Silesia. It was there—at Bad Kudova—that I found the first child. Her name is Eva Kubik. I was so eager to get her home to her mother that I left without searching the area further."

Upper Silesia was far away. It would be a long time before his little car would once again be rattling through the streets of Krocchavly-Kladno and the women would be imploring him to stop.

The women of vanished Lidice—how had they come to settle in this new, unpronounceable place?

Germans had been living here—coal barons, mining experts, Nazi administrators, Gestapo. When the Nazis had been driven out, the Czech miners might have moved from their own wretched quarters into the handsome homes. Instead, they sent for the Lidice women.

"The miners," said Slava, "are paying for their livelihood and I've never known prouder and happier hosts. They'll take care of the children too. I must go and find them."

THE END

LIBERTY