

The Hamsa.... an excerpt

by E.S. Kraay

We slip past one other patrol in the high mountains, and by early morning, we reach Štubnianske Teplice, a small Czechoslovakian town tucked in a quiet valley alive with the colors of the fall. We are in luck and come upon railroad tracks, which we follow like hobos northwest to the station. We are very hungry and the dawning sweetness of a nearby apple orchard draws us to it. As the day warms, bees will swarm fallen apples that deer did not dine on during the night. Our coat pockets hang heavy, bulging with fruit, when we hear a loud whistle that announces an approaching train. Its chimney spews thick, black smoke that hangs in the heavy air for hundreds of meters.

We run through the tall grass toward a stand of thick bushes 400 meters south of the station. I don't know who are more startled, Stashu and me, or the woman and the two children who hide with her. They shrink back and gape at us as we tumble into the muddy trench along the tracks. The woman stares at us through hollow eyes as her frightened children, a boy and a girl cling tightly to her coat.

I raise the palms of my hands and tell them, "Do not be afraid." She looks from me to Stashu and pulls the children to her breast. They bury their heads on her shoulders and whimper into her long, black hair. A visage of Amalia passes transparently over her pretty face, then disappears.

Her eyes fill. She struggles bravely for her children's sake, but she cannot contain her tears. "Please don't hurt us," she sobs with a wavering voice.

"We've no intention to," I say.

"How can we help you?" Stashu asks.

She hesitates, afraid to speak. "Please," I urge her, "Do not be afraid. How can we help you?"

She wipes her eyes and decides she can trust us. Does she have a choice? "German soldiers are in the town. We are Jews, but my

husband is *Sokół*. He and his friends confronted these men. I watched from a distance. They exchanged angry words with the Germans." The woman begins to sob again and forces the words through her moans, "A soldier drew his pistol and fired a single shot. My husband fell to the ground." It has begun.

The train lumbers into the station and sits hissing like a huge iron snake, resting for but a few minutes before it begins to pull itself westward toward Austria and beyond.

"We've a few moments," I tell the woman as calmly as I can. "What are your intentions?"

"To flee from this place and find safety for my children."

Options are few, and Stanisław speaks up. "We will help you, madam. We cannot say where you will find safe haven," he continues, "But I am traveling to Switzerland, to the Red Cross. I do not know that it is safe even there, but if you can trust me, I will bring you and your children with me."

My duty obliges me to tell him, "They will slow you down, Stashu." I look to the frightened women and say, "I'm sorry, *Pani*, but we have important messages we must deliver, my friend's to Geneva, mine to Rome."

Before she can respond, Stashu raises his hand. "We will manage. Do not worry. I will deliver the message and this family in good time." Hope shines briefly in her troubled eyes, then fades. He places his arm around her shoulder and stares confidently at me as he repeats, "Do not be afraid. We will manage."

The engineer whistles his departure and the locomotive inches forward, straining to drag its long and heavy load. I tilt my head to the side and say, "Okay, then here is what we must do. The train will be moving slowly as it approaches us. As soon as the engine is by us, we climb to the edge of the track. We must run to keep pace until we find an open car. Stashu and I must carry your children. They will be frightened; the noise from the wheels will be very loud. You, *Pani* must stay with us. Can you hoist yourself into the car as it passes."

She is uncertain, but nods her head. "You must," I emphasize. "You have no choice." The children are afraid to come to Stashu and me until we force smiles to our tired faces. The boy may be five-years-old, the little girl, maybe seven and very petite. With little time to make friends with these terrified children, I think to show them my *hamsa*. The little girl smiles and comes to me at her mother's urging. Stashu winks at the boy and the toddler leaps into his open arms. The mother is relieved. "You 'thtink.'" The little boy lisps as he pinches his nose with his free hand.

"Where's Papa?" the girls asks. "Isn't he coming with us?"

"These nice men are taking us to meet him," the mother responds. "Please do as they say."

The steam engine is gaining speed as it plods past us. The engineer is too busy monitoring his gauges to notice us in the bushes. We rise to our feet and scramble up the incline to get as near to the moving train as we can. I lead with the girl in my arms, and Stashu follows holding the boy in one arm and he uses his free hand to help the mother. The children cover their ears from the screeching wheels that seek steely purchase on the iron tracks.

Looking over my shoulder, I glimpse an open door and begin to jog. It will make no difference what might be in that car, an angel or a devil. That open door is this broken family's only chance for survival. As the car comes alongside us, other anxious faces stare at us from the gloom, but not a one offers to help. I toss the girl inside as gently as I am able, then pull myself up. "We need help," I yell above the noise of the wheels and one of the travelers crawls forward and pulls the girl to the relative safety on the far side of the dark cabin.

Stashu releases the mother's hand so he can get the boy into the car. In a heartbeat, she falls and tumbles painfully into the ditch. Stashu hesitates for an instant, but I will not let him fail Poland or these two children. "No!" I yell at him, and grabbing the collar of his coat, somehow find the strength to haul him into the car. As his feet dangle in the wind, we watch the mother rise to her feet with hands to her face. She makes a frantic effort to crawl back up the

incline to the edge of the track but fails and rolls back into the ditch. Resigned to her failure, she waves with one arm and blows a final kiss to her orphaned children with the other. She disappears from our sight as the train rounds a bend.

I drag my friend across the rough planks, deeper into the car, and hold him tightly. Neither of us has the mental strength to face the children, but it is unavoidable. Stashu's chest shudders as he fights to restrain the agony he feels at the mother's loss. The scream in my throat chokes me like a hangman's noose, but I hold it there knowing it will accomplish nothing and only heighten the children's despair. Stashu and I stare through the open door as the scenery races by. A man, 10 years my senior grunts, stands and rolls the heavy door closed, thus eliminating my fleeting desire to jump out and run away from this disaster and any responsibility we might have to these orphans. The car is old and light invades through wide cracks in the boarded side. The little boy speaks first.

"Where's Mama?" he asks. Our hearts shatter like falling icicles, but answer him, we must. His question hangs like the heavy stench of rotten vegetables that even the ventilated boards cannot clear.

I release Stashu and breathe deeply while I swallow my tears, then turn to the children and smile. "Your mother will join us with your father," I lie to them. "It will be okay. Do not be afraid." Sunlight shines directly into the girl's eyes creating a yellow mask against the shadows. Her eyes say she does not believe me. The little boy crawls to Stashu and lays his head in Stashu's lap. We speak little throughout the day, content to let the constant drumming of the wheels keep us in a suspended state of disbelief and incredulity.

I can assure you that there is a big difference between the comfort of the passenger cars I have occupied on the European and American continents and riding on the hard floor of an empty but smelly vegetable car. If there is such a thing as luck — which I am occasionally inclined to believe — then luck is with Stashu, the children and me and all who share this. Every time the train slows and stops, we wait nervously, praying that the door will not slide

open to reveal our hiding place. It never happens. God cloaks us with the power of invisibility. The doors on the car in front of us and on the car behind us slowly squeal open, then close, but our door remains shut.

"It is your *hamsa* that protects us," the girl whispers to me.

"Then I shall give it to you," I reply and reach beneath my shirt, but her small hand stays mine.

"No," she says in the unselfish innocence of her youth. "It is yours and you must keep it." I smile and kiss her dirty forehead. Eternity passes while time stands still.

Many of our traveling companions leap from the car hoping to find refuge in the woods along the way, but other refugees always replace them. Somewhere not far from Innsbruck — which we glean from conversations outside our invisible car — the train turns south. We hoped it would continue west for the sake of the children, but it does not.

"It is time to part and go our separate ways," Stashu whispers so as not to wake the sleeping children. "I will take the children with me. Their chance at a new life is much better in Switzerland than in Italy." He is right, and shame overcomes me because I am indeed relieved to pass the responsibility of the children to Stashu. "I think we will be able to find another train, heaven-sent, like this one to take us to Geneva." I believe him.

Sunrise greets the train as it slowly approaches another rural station nestled in the Alps of Tyrol at the eastern edge of the range. The children stir and rub their tired eyes.

"I'm hungry," the boy says. I take an apple from my pocket and split it with my thumbs. Each child accepts the fruit gratefully, not ravenously, as one might think. They do not stuff their mouths with large bites, but rather cherish this simple meal. The girl ponders each small bite she takes and wipes the thin stream of juice from her chin and licks her fingers dry. She makes the apple last and is thankful for it.

It is best not to prolong their departure, and as the train shudders to a stop, Stashu says, "It is time for us to leave this train, children. We will find another."

The little ones are worried. Too much change, too many new people in such a short and stressful time. Lifelines are severed to what they know. Who to trust? "But why?" the little boy asks.

"It will be okay," Stashu tells them. "I will bring you to safety in the land of Heidi, cuckoo clocks and yodeling. Do you know Heidi?"

"We know Heidi, but what is 'yodeling?'" the girl asks.

"I will teach you when we are in Switzerland. For now, we must be very quiet." I peer cautiously through the space between two slats of wood and, without taking my eyes from the yard outside, wave 'okay' to my friend. There is activity several cars down the line, but it is quiet near us. Stashu slowly opens the door, just enough so he and his wards can slip through.

He drops to the ground and I pass him the boy, then the girl. She raises her large eyes to me and says, "Aren't you coming with us?"

I shake my head 'no.' She smiles and bravely wards off her tears. I place my left hand over my heart and feel the *hamsa*. I nod to Stashu. "Until we meet again," he says. Lifting the boy in his strong, left arm, he takes the girl by her hand, and they flee into the nearby forest. Stanisław Marusarz is a hero.

Quietly, I pull the door closed. I sit in the corner with my head in my hands and weep. I rue the tears that stain my life. I never even knew their names.

