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The Seven Lives of Agneša Kalinová

Fear-mongering, Islamophobia, and xenophobia have set the tone of the current debate on Europe's refugee crisis, drowning out voices of compassion and solidarity. Instead of leading with rational arguments to dispel these vitriolic opinions in the debate, most politicians have jumped on the populist bandwagon and further exacerbated tensions. There have, of course, been exceptions – notably Slovakia's president Andrej Kiska and the civil society volunteers who banded together to help the refugees stranded at the Keleti Station in Budapest and on Europe's border crossings.

A more welcoming general response might have been expected from countries with a recent history of oppression and atrocities that generated successive waves of migration from Central Europe through much of the twentieth century. One of the many people whose life exemplifies this history was my mother, Slovak journalist Agneša Kalinová (1924-2014).

In *Mojich 7 životov* (*My Seven Lives*), a book-length conversation with Jana Juráňová published by ASPEKT in 2012, Agneša Kalinová defined discontinuity as a characteristic feature of her life:

"A lifelong – and typically Central European – motif. A sudden upheaval, imposed by outside circumstances, by the unwanted interference of external forces, would suddenly erase everything, or at least much of what we had until then taken for granted. Everything would have to begin again from scratch; it would be like the start of a new era."

The book is structured in seven chapters, each reflecting a distinct period of Agneša Kalinová's long and tumultuous life. It began with an idyllic childhood in the tolerant and multicultural city of Prešov, in the easternmost part of interwar Czechoslovakia. This was followed by exclusion, anti-Jewish legislation, and finally the Holocaust, which consumed her parents and extended family while she survived most of the war hidden in a convent in the Hungarian capital, Budapest. The nuns of the order of the Good Shepherd protected her along with numerous others; deportations from the Hungarian countryside began in 1944 and dozens of Jewish girls found refuge in the convent. My 20-year-old mother, together with another Jewish girl, left the nuns' protection and spent the last year of the war in a working-class suburb of Budapest. They were hosted in the house of a kind Hungarian railway man, who risked his own life by offering them sanctuary.

After the war, like many other survivors of the horrors of Nazism, my mother was taken in by the promise of a bright, so-

cialist future. While the Stalinist 1950s culminated in the monstrous Slánský show trials which brought with them a lingering disillusionment, they were followed by the 1960s thaw. During this time she wrote for the cultural weekly *Kultúrny život* and was at the forefront of the Prague Spring in Slovakia. Those heady days were brutally ended by the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. During this so-called normalization period, Agneša Kalinová was banned from practicing her profession, suffered harassment, and detention (my father spent a year in prison). This cumulated in our forced relocation to Germany, in 1978, where we lived in exile. Here she received a warm welcome and began another career as a political commentator for Radio Free Europe, her voice becoming familiar to thousands of listeners.

In *My Seven Lives* that familiar voice can be heard loud and clear, thanks to Jana Juráňová's skillful and sensitive use of the techniques of oral history to bring out my mother's lively personality, and her extraordinary ability to stay positive in the face of adversity.

Although my mother visited Slovakia frequently after 1989, she chose to stay in Germany after she retired. When people questioned her decision to remain in the country that unleashed the Holocaust, she would reply that she felt safe among people who had engaged in a thorough discussion of their past

and admitted their role in atrocities. By comparison, Slovakia has never fully come to terms with its past and admitted its complicity in the deportations of some 70,000 of its Jewish citizens. She was particularly disturbed by the recent trend to relativize the war crimes, which has led to attempts to whitewash the wartime Slovak state and rehabilitate its leading politicians.

In spite of this ambivalence, Agneša Kalinová, as well as my father, the satirist Ján Ladislav Kalina (who died in exile in Munich in 1981), had a deep bond with Slovak culture, and I decided that their final resting place should be Bratislava. On the 8th of June, 2015, a sizeable crowd of friends and acquaintances gathered to pay their final tribute to my parents. A week later a much larger crowd of extreme right-wing supporters as well as many ordinary citizens, marched through the center of Bratislava protesting against the alleged "Islamization of Slovakia" and shouting "Slovakia for the Slovaks!"

However, Agneša Kalinová's memory is cherished in Slovakia by the legions of her friends, her listeners and readers, many of whom were born well after the historic upheavals that shaped her seven lives. /



Agneša Kalinová

Mojich 7 životov ("My Seven Lives",
Aspekt, 2012)

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