

Hannah (Hana)

Author: Alena Mornštajnová

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About the Author: Alena Mornštajnová (1963) comes from a Czech family in Valašské Meziříčí in Moravia. She graduated from English and Czech Studies at the University of Ostrava and taught English at the Business Academy in Valašské Meziříčí. Since 2000, she has devoted most of her time to translation and writing. She translates popular novels centered on women. Her first book was published in 2013 when she was fifty. Her novels often focus on the impressive or tragic fates of several generations of women in the Czech Lands during the 20th century (WW I, WW II and the Nazi occupation as well as the Communist regime). Her work has gained popularity, mainly thanks to her novel *Hannah*. It has become a top-selling book and has achieved massive success on social networks.

Further Important Publications: *Slepá mapa* (Blind Map, 2013, novel), *Hotýlek* (The Dosshouse, 2015, novel), *Tiché vody* (Still Waters, 2019, novel)

Content and Interpretation

The novel consists of three parts. Each of them is set in a different time period and is narrated in different way. The first part, “I, Mira: 1954–1963”, is written in the first person narrated by the young girl Miroslava (Mira) Karásková. At the beginning of the story she is seven. She lives in the Moravian town Valašské Meziříčí with her parents and two younger siblings. In February of 1954, the family celebrates her mother’s 30th birthday and after dinner, dessert is served, “yolk wreaths“ (a sweet pastry with vanilla cream). Mira, despite her parents forbidding it, was playing on the frozen river a day before and fell into the icy water. Now she doesn’t get the dessert as a punishment for her disobedience. Paradoxically it saves her life. The whole family gets infected with typhoid, because the water in the confecionery was contaminated. A typhoid epidemic breaks out in the town. All the members of the Karásek family die, except for Mira and her aunt Hannah (Hana). Hannah, who has survived the concentrations camps and suffers from depression, also gets ill and falls from the window of the hospital in a delirium. Nevertheless, Hannah is saved at last, because she went through typhoid fever in Auschwitz. After becoming an orphan, Mira first lives with the family of her mother’s friend Ivana Horáčková. But Ivana’s husband is unenthusiastic about it and Horáček’s children, primarily the daughter Ida, chase and victimize her. This is why Mira is moved to her odd aunt Hannah. Hannah is thirty five years old but she is physically and mentally ruined and unable to work and speak with people. Living together is complicated for both of them and Ida feels very lonely. She finds a good school friend Jarmila, however, Ida steals her away from Mira. Mira learns for the first time that she is a Jew. Mira gets closer to Ida’s brother Gusta, a very clever boy who becomes her lover and later husband. They are expecting a baby but Gusta is expelled from study and is drafted into military service. The second part of the novel, “People before Me: 1933–1945”, is narrated also by Mira, but she returns to the life of her relatives prior to her birth. Mira’s mother Rosa and her aunt Hannah grow up in the secularized Jewish Heler family in Valašské Meziříčí. After the early death of Mira’s grandfather, her grandmother Elsa manages the family stationary shop and raises her daughters alone. Hannah falls in love with Jaroslav Horáček, a regular soldier, and they secretly plan to live together. In the autumn of 1938, after the German army has taken a

part of the Czechoslovak territory (the Sudetenland), Jewish refugees come to the town, among others are Elsa's parents, and they talk about Nazi violence towards the Jews. Elsa tries to save her family. She sells the house and shop and writes a letter to her uncle in Britain to help them to emigrate. Nevertheless, Hannah does not bring the letter to the post office hoping Jaroslav will marry her. Nevertheless, after the Nazi occupation of the Czech Lands, Jaroslav is afraid of living with a Jewish wife, and he breaks up with her and marries her classmate Ivana. (This is moment the reader learns that this is the Horáček family where the orphaned Mira spends some months.) Now it is too late to emigrate. In September 1942, the Heler family is deported to Theresienstadt and following to Auschwitz, except for Rosa, who is hidden in the house of the Czech Karásek family. Rosa Helerová and Karel Karásek fall in love. After surviving the War, they marry and Rosa gives birth to a daughter, Mira. The narrative perspective of the novel is changed in the third and shortest part, "I, Hannah: 1942–1963"; it is told by Hannah. She describes her stay in Theresienstadt, then in Auschwitz from October 1944 to January 1945 when the camp was liberated by the Red Army, and her post-war life in Meziříčí. The results of her internment are her physical disability and depression. Moreover, she suffers agonies of remorse because she unwillingly caused the death of several people. In her eyes, the unposted letter in Meziříčí caused the deportation of her family. In Theresienstadt she had a boyfriend, the cook Leo who provide food for her. Hannah was pregnant by him, was sent to the hospital and screamed in a fever that Leo Veselý would care of the baby. The child died immediately after its birth and Leo was sent to Auschwitz and gased as a punishment. After the War, her sister Rosa was the only person with whom she was able to communicate. Hannah bought the sweet pastries for Rosa's family in an effort to please Rosa on the day of her 30th birthday. However, the dessert was contaminated and due to this, the whole Karásek family dies, except for Mira. "I bring disaster upon the people who I love and who love me. I knew that a long time ago. My mum died, because I delayed our departure to England. I condemned Leo to death, because I can't keep my mouth shut [...]. And suddenly Rosa and her family were also dead and I have lived on..." (Mornštajnová, 2017, p. 291). In spite of this, the end of the novel seems to suggest hope. Hanna's niece Mira gives birth to a son Otík and Hanna knits caps and small sweaters for him. "My memories visit me all the time. Many of them are thorny, but more and more come those that make me to want to live." (p. 306)

Main Topics and Problems

Some situations depicted in *Hannah* were inspired by real persons and events. In 1954 a typhoid epidemic did break out in Valašské Meziříčí. There was no city water supply in the town and sewage seeped into the local wells. Several hundred people were infected and twenty of them died. The town was isolated, a strict quarantine was declared; schools and businesses were closed. Similar to the novel, the town's public address system announced the names of the gravely ill people, the slightly ill, the healed and the dead every evening. Also the author's grandmother was among the sick. Being in the hospital she was unbalanced by the sickness and jumped out of the window – just like Hannah in the novel. Alena Mornštajnová originally intended to write a fictional story just on the basis of this event (see Kubíková, 2018). Later she decided to add another story line, the life of the Jews and their persecution in her hometown Valašské Meziříčí. About 200 Jews lived in the 1930s there but none of them returned after the War. The local synagogue was destroyed in the 1950s. In 2004, a Memorial to the Holocaust was built where the synagogue once stood. Nevertheless, some of the Jews in Meziříčí survived and emigrated to the West or to Israel, like Michael Honey (formerly Misa Honigswachs, 1929–2013) whose family lived in Nový Jičín and fled 15 kilometers south to Valašské Meziříčí after the annexion of the Sudetenland

by the Germans. His testimony, which was recorded by the UCS Shoah Foundation (Honey, 1997) inspired Alena Mornštajnová.

Some ever present motifs of Czech and Central European Holocaust literature can be found in the novel. Like many other survivors, Hannah feels guilty to have survived at the expense of her loved ones. The Czech name Hana sounds identical to the Czech word „hana“ (which means “slur” in English). Hannah feels guilty to have survived at the expense of her loved ones. Another motif is the naivety of the Jews believing in the middle of the 20th century it was impossible massively to kill the Jews. They argued that the time of pogroms had gone or that Czechoslovakia was not Germany (pp. 127 and 139). Another common motif is the anxious relation to eating among survivors. Hannah hides slices of bread in her apartment as well as in her pockets. The postwar “forgetting” of the Jews is also symptomatic. Mira, a teenager, doesn’t know what the word “Jew” means, although her mother was Jewish. The novel uses some conventional devices. It escalates drama by combining two main catastrophic events, the War and the Holocaust as well as the post-war typhoid epidemic. The character of Hannah seems to be somewhat stereotypical and implausible. She experiences too many tragic, harsh situations and desperations: the killing of most of her relatives including her boyfriend and newborn baby during the War, the death of her sister and her family (except for Mira) after the War, severe injuries after falling out of the window etc.

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