



NO PAST TENSE by D. Z. Stone

An excerpt from *No Past Tense: Love and Survival in the Shadow of the Holocaust*

(Vallentine Mitchell; 2019)

Prologue

Sixteen-year old Kati Kellner met nineteen-year-old Willi Salcer in April of 1944 after they had been forced into the same ghetto. They were together for one week before Willi was taken.

437,402 Jews from Hungary and the annexed portion of Czechoslovakia were transported to Auschwitz between 15 May 1944 and 10 July 1944. 400,000 were gassed upon arrival and the rest sent into slave labor. Less than five percent of those sent into labor are said to have returned. Kati Kellner was one of those people.

Approximately 15,000 men survived Mauthausen, the most notorious of the camps. Of these, it is estimated that the number of Jewish survivors was not more than 1,500. Willi Salcer was among these Jews.

After the War, Kati went looking for Willi.

She found him.

W: My memory is not too perfect. We have no diary of this time and I have to tell you that we tried not to talk about it. Not at all. Especially my wife Kati. It was just too painful.

K: Willi is right. We never talked about it, even to our children. When they asked I volunteered as little as possible. Now our son wants to know. But I would appreciate your patience. No matter how much I prepare myself, I cannot help but get overwhelmed. Last night—all night—I had nightmares. Willi sits here watching TV and I am in bed, asleep and screaming. After so many years. I do not know. Can I call myself oversensitive? Our son wants the entire story. So we have decided to tell you everything. Otherwise, what is the point?

1.

Hitler on the Radio Summer 1938

While Hitler ranted on the radio that summer of 1938 about wanting more 'Lebensraum' or living space for the German race, ten-year-old Kati Kellner's concerns mostly centered on riding her new bicycle up and down the main street of Plesivec, her small Slovak village. Kati especially loved racing with Tomas, a boy from her one-room elementary school, the friend she played with most every day. It did not matter that Tomas was a Christian and Kati a Jew.

No one said you are a Jew or you are not a Jew. I had a normal and happy childhood in Plesivec. I had no idea that people hated Jews. I did not know anything about Hitler. All I knew is that my grandfather had bought me a bicycle – I had the only ladies bicycle in town, a rare and unusual item in Czechoslovakia at the time. My grandfather loved spoiling me rotten.

Plesivec, a mountain village of about two thousand with seven or eight Jewish families, was not some rural Slovak backwater. Home to the Samuel Blum Psychiatric Institute, considered the most progressive mental hospital in all of Czechoslovakia, the thriving village was also an important stopover point for trains going north and south. Trips to Budapest, the grand city known as the 'Paris of the East,' were the norm for Plesivec's elite, which included Kati's parents, Ilona and Ladislav Kellner, who owned the only pharmacy serving Plesivec as well as several neighboring villages.

Kati's father Ladislav, who came from modest means and had worked his way through the renowned Charles University in Prague, was known as a good man who never turned away anyone if they did not have money to pay for their medicine – it was said that his allowing the villagers to barter was why his family had more eggs than they could ever eat. Ladislav was also known as a generous family man who took his stylish wife to Budapest on weekends and the Italian Riviera for vacation – he had even paid for his younger brother Pavel to attend his university so he too could become a pharmacist.

Was my parents' marriage a love match? I do not know, adults never talked about such things with children, but I do know my parents treated each other with great friendship and the utmost respect.

With two full-time pharmacists, along with a staff to clean and stock shelves, the Kellner Pharmacy did not require the help of Kati's mother Ilona. Instead, she ran the household, over-seeing the maids, cook, gardener and laundress. Admired as a gracious and welcoming hostess, Ilona Kellner was at the center of Plesivec's lively social set, whether hosting a formal luncheon when the President of Czechoslovakia visited the village, or at her weekly coffee and cake evenings, a mainstay of Plesivec's business and professional class.

On warm evenings my parents would have their company for coffee and cake on the back stone terrace of our house. Before the company came, my mother showered and fixed her hair. She wore lipstick and smelled better than the roses in her garden. Children did not socialize with adults but sometimes our fraulein nanny would bring my younger brother Alexander and me to greet the guests and we would say hello in our best Viennese German – the language spoken in sophisticated company.

If the adults around Kati Kellner were concerned about the political situation and Hitler, the ten-year-old did not have a clue.

Willi Salcer, fourteen at the time, was acutely aware of the end of Czechoslovakia. He would hear the adults around him talk about that crazy man Hitler. And unlike Kati Kellner, Willi grew up knowing what it was like for people to hate Jews.

Willi was four years old when his father's vast agricultural business in Neporazda went bankrupt in 1928.

It was after a try at industrialization – my father could not find spare parts or mechanics who could repair the complicated machinery.

The family moved to Tornalja, a Slovak town of five thousand, mostly made up of ethnic Hungarians, most of whom (it seemed to Willi) hated Jews. When Willi was seven or eight and allowed to walk alone to school, people would often point out his pious sideburns. 'Dirty little Jew boy!' Sometimes it was more than insults, with bands of boys chasing Willi down and beating him up.

Joining Betar, the Jewish youth organization, made life a little more pleasant. I loved wearing my Betar uniform with its blue beret. It made me feel important, especially when I was called by my Hebrew name at meetings: Zev. I was Zev, a Wolf. I liked that a lot. When I was ten, I tired of running when the boys came after me. When a boy on the soccer field called me a dirty Jew, I beat him up. The next time I played, this boy and his friends beat me up. I was afraid, but I went back, and played.

When Willi was ten years old, his parents separated and once again his home situation changed dramatically.

It had been a very unhappy household. My parents argued about money all the time. To better fulfill family expectations, my father tried various business ventures. Once during Christmas, he exported trees from Slovakia to Hungary but he never got paid for the trees. Finally, to make money, he started transporting illegally produced alcohol. When he was arrested for bootlegging, my mother's brother Alexander Weisz, came to Tornalja with a lawyer. Alexander paid thousands to have my father released from jail. That was the end of the marriage.

After the separation, Willi went back and forth between his parents. First he stayed with his father in Tornalja, in a house so dilapidated even the beds were broken, then with his mother and sister in Jelsava. Willi thought Jelsava – a Slovak village about ten miles from Kati Kellner's village of Plesivec – was the most beautiful place on earth, with lots of friendly children and no Jew haters as far as Will could tell.

In the spring of 1938, Willi's father bought a small hotel several hours away by train in the larger town of Hnusta, and that summer Willi was sent to live with him. The fourteen-year-old did not want to leave Jelsava – he loved his school and friends – but Willi did not have a say in the matter.

I was sitting in the hotel dining room and my father was with a group of men playing cards when he looked over at me and said, 'What are we going to do with you?' I told him I would like to become a doctor but there was a problem. Before medical school, I would have to attend a gymnasium. The closest was in Rimavská Sobota, two and a half hours by train. To be accepted, I would have to take tests, and there were two subjects I had never studied: Latin and German.

Willi's father promised if his son wanted to become a doctor, he would find a way. Lajos Salcer hired tutors, and for two months, Willi studied Latin and German in a corner of the hotel dining room.

It was in the hotel dining room where Willi would often hear discussions about Hitler. And more and more, Willi would hear Hitler on the radio, yelling, 'Lebensraum.'

Hitler wanted this Lebensraum or living space. He said he needed more air to breathe, and it soon became apparent that he wanted to breathe all over Czechoslovakia.

Created as a new state in 1918 after the First World War, Czechoslovakia had been carved out of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. The only democracy in central Europe, the country became one of the world's top-ten industrial nations.

Relatively speaking, Czechoslovakia was a good place to be a Jew. Certainly there were

varying degrees of anti-Semitism on the local level – especially in Slovakian villages with large ethnic Hungarian populations – but by law, Jews had full freedom.

The living space Hitler specifically wanted was the Sudetenland, the area of Czechoslovakia that bordered Germany, and the Czechs did not want to give it up.

Why should we give it up? It would be crazy to lose our fortified frontier, leaving nothing between Czechoslovakia and Germany. That is what all the adults around me insisted.

Riled by Hitler's rants of bringing all Germans into the fold, there were protests and riots among the almost three million Sudete Germans. Night after night, Willi heard them on the radio, yelling, 'We want Germany!' Then Hitler demanded that Czechoslovakia give the Sudete Germans the right to self-determination, making it clear he was ready to fight over this.

It was an extremely tense situation, but Czechoslovakia was certain the countries with which we had cross-protection treaties would come to our aid. All the adults around me believed this, absolutely, but this was not to be.

Czechoslovakia's allies, including Britain and France, abandoned it. No-one was willing to go to war over the Sudete. After all, the Sudete was mostly ethnic Germans, and maybe if they let Hitler have this territory he would quiet down and Europe would have peace.

To appease Hitler, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, with France in approval, proposed a conference. Hitler agreed and they met in Munich in September of 1938.

Can you believe it? Czechoslovakia was not invited to its own dismemberment.

At the Munich Conference, not only was Hitler awarded the Sudetenland, about ten thousand square miles of Czech territory, but shockingly, Poland and Hungary were also given slices of the country.

The Sudetenland going to Germany was expected. Poland and Hungary also being handed pieces of Czechoslovakia was not expected. It was unbelievable. Germany, France, Britain and Italy have a conference where they cut up Czechoslovakia and we have nothing to say about it.

Poland received a four hundred square mile patch of the Teschen area, and Hungary a wide swath of Czechoslovakia's Slovakia and Ruthenia. Hungary's slice consisted of five thousand square miles, inhabited by about a million people, including Kati Kellner and her family.

K: All I knew as a young girl was that one day we lived in Czechoslovakia and the next, we lived in Hungary. Do you know where the new border was? In the forest behind my backyard. I could put one foot in Czechoslovakia and one in Hungary. If the adults around me were upset over this, they did not let me know; it became a game to me and my friends. We would have fun putting our feet in different countries. It was different for Willi.

W: Yes, my parents were divorced and I had the unusual situation with the shifting borders that my father and I were still in Czechoslovakia but my mother and sister were now in Hungary. We were suddenly living in different countries.

Willi was home from his gymnasium in Rimavská Sobota and with his father in Hnusta on 15 March 1939, when without warning, Hitler invaded what was left of Czechoslovakia.

This came after British Prime Minister Chamberlain had said the Munich Agreement would bring peace in our time. What a joke.

Hitler further cut up Czechoslovakia, making Slovakia, one of the country's historical regions, a separate state with a government headed by an extreme anti-Semite, Jozef Tiso.

Hnusta, where Willi's father had his hotel, was in Slovakia.

There was a mobilization, and my father's hotel was taken over by the Slovak army. There was tremendous anti-Semitism. You did not know what would happen to you tomorrow. Save your life, war was expected. It was – I do not know if you know the feeling – you are threatened immediately. You have no protection. There is no law and order. There was no need to get an indictment of any kind. They just took you. It's over.

When the Slovak army commandeered the hotel, soldiers filled the dining room, eating and drinking whatever they wanted. Lajos Salcer had instructed his small staff to feed the soldiers: do not worry if we run out of anything, do not ask them to pay.

After making sure the rowdy soldiers were satiated, Lajos Salcer calmly walked over to his son Willi and told him to get his coat. 'We will walk out the front door as if we are going for an evening stroll. Do not look back. Whatever you do, do not look back.'

Willi and his father, along with his father's younger sister Ibolya, walked through the night until they reached a train station on the other side of the border in Hungary. Lajos Salcer put his son on a train for Jelsava, where Willy's mother and sister lived.

Before Willi boarded the train, his father told him that he knew that when Willi was a young boy he had been a constant target for anti-Jewish insults, and instead of running, Willi had defended himself. His father said that Willi was a good and proud Jew and he would always be a good and proud Jew. But sometimes we are outnumbered, and we cannot fight. Willi promised his father that he would take care of his mother and sister.

Willi also promised that he would continue to pray twice a day.

How Writing About Holocaust Survivors Changed My Life

(This essay first appeared in Jewess Magazine on August 2019)

This is what I told Kati and Willi Salcer when I first met them about writing their life story: I'm not a Holocaust scholar and didn't even know much about Auschwitz until I saw a film about the concentration camp in high school. Yes, I'm part Jewish but was raised among my father's Polish Catholic family where I could easily imagine relatives back in Krakow throwing rocks at Jews as they were taken away. Had the Salcers

ever heard of the Latvian war criminal Boleslavs Maikovskis? He lived only blocks from me; his house was on the way to church (which he attended every day). His wife was a regular at my Grandmother's weekly ladies' Pokeno game. When it came out that as a police officer in Latvia that Maikovskis had ordered the mass execution of Jews, many of his neighbors said the war was long over and it was time to move on. Leave the old man alone.

I fully expected the Salcers to say that I wasn't the writer for them. Instead Willi Salcer looked at me and said, "Then you understand anti-Semitism," and I took on the project that would change my life.

Willi and Kati Salcer were two Czech Jews who as teenagers had been swept up by the Holocaust in Hungary and survived Auschwitz and Mauthausen, respectively. Their son hired me to chronicle his parents' wartime experience since they wouldn't talk about it to him. To this end I started interviewing the Salcers a couple of times a week, both alone and together. I would then go home and transcribe the tapes by hand. I often thought it was listening to the tapes over and over as I transcribed, really taking their words in, was why I started having nightmares.

In one nightmare I ran through my house with Nazis coming after me. In another I was sleeping on a stack of dead bodies. There were more nightmares about standing in line for the gas chamber than I can remember. I'd wake up sweating, and even though I knew I was only feeling secondhand terror, I became consumed with how the Salcers could live 'normal' lives after being subjected to terror for real for so long. How did they rebuild their lives after undergoing the worst of what people can do to people?

I asked the Salcers about covering their entire lives. They agreed and it soon became apparent that their survivor story extended into post-war Europe, their illegal journey to Palestine, living in Israel, moving to America in 1960—up until the very days they died.

With remarkable grace and dignity, the Salcers tried to live 'normal' lives. They did this in spite of constant nightmares. They did this even though they both cried when they were alone. Their answer to having lived through extreme anti-Semitism was not to call for revenge but to warn others that it was not only hatred for Jews. It was hatred that any people can have for any group of people, a hatred that is always under the veneer of civilization, a hatred whose emergence we must guard against always.

The Salcers would often joke that they would make a nice Jewish girl out of me. G-d willing.

After Note:

The Salcer interviews would become the basis for a book published in 2019 by Vallentine Mitchell, entitled, **NO PAST TENSE: Love and Survival in the Shadow of the Holocaust**

. The Salcers are now both gone but I think they would be pleased that **NO PAST TENSE** is taught in college courses on the Holocaust and Jewish Literature, and is on the shelves of over 500 university libraries.



D. Z. has authored *No Past Tense: Love and Survival in the Shadow of the Holocaust* (2019), and co-authored *A Fairy Tale Unmasked: The Teacher and the Nazi Slaves* (2021), both published by Vallentine Mitchell Publishers. She has reported for the The New York Times and Newsday, and recently made her fiction debut with a short story in *Coollest American Stories 2022* (Coollest Stories Press). A graduate of the College of William and Mary, she holds a master's from Columbia University.

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