

A Thousand Kisses: A Grandmother's Holocaust Letters

Renata Polt

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What kept millions of Eastern European Jews from emigrating in the late 1930s, even in 1940 or 1941, while there was still a chance to save their lives? *A Thousand Kisses: A Grandmother's Holocaust Letters* offers some insights and possible reasons in answer to this mystifying question.

Sensing from the start that the rise of Hitler, with his edicts of restrictions imposed only on Jews meant imminent danger, Henriette Pollatschek's son, Frederich, took his family on "vacation" in Switzerland and then to Cuba in 1938, hoping to eventually enter the United States. Though Frederich begged his mother to go with them, she chose to remain at home in Czechoslovakia, near the border of Germany. The extraordinary letters included here, most of them from Frederick's mother (Mamina) to her son and his family, are the letters sent during the years following the family's departure-until they ceased on the day Mamina was transported to Treblinka, where she and her daughter, Lene, each became a tattooed number of Hitler's six million.

The letters begin on April 7, 1939 shortly after Frederich and his family have fled Czechoslovakia-just eighteen days before the Sudetenland invasion, when Mamina and Lene fled to Prague where they expected to be safe. Revealing so much of what holds a person to a place, a way of life and an ethnic affiliation, the letters are warm, filled with minute events, trials and tribulations, and always sent with "a thousand kisses" to her loved ones, with prayers that they will soon all be together again. They also, however, tell how the literate, artistic and perceptive Mamina and Lene eked out an ever-increasing precarious existence until 1942, when the Germans finally caught up with them.

Mamina and Lene are evicted from one small apartment to another even smaller apartment time and time again, all the while trying to preserve as much of the material remnants of their former lives as possible-the furniture, the silver, the jewelry and down comforters. Even the daily foraging for food as more and more shops are closed to Jews had Mamina, like many other Jews, nominally convert to Catholicism in order to survive. Frederich, after receiving the letters of their dire situation, and knowing what it took to get out himself-the number of forms to be filled out and notarized, the security of a visa, the cost of a ship ticket and the establishment of an amount of money in the country to be visited-made arrangements many times. But each time Mamina was torn, for she did not want to leave Lene, who did not want to part from her possessions, the life she knew, or the possibility of hearing from her husband and son, long missing. How ironic, Mamina writes, that "Jews applying for emigration were made to fill out at least sixteen forms, supply certificates of health, good conduct, property tax payments, ad infinitum, by a government whose declared policy was the encouragement of emigration."

Much has been made of the "ghetto mentality" of the Jews, as if they just accepted their fate. Mamina's letters help to erase much of this belief, presenting instead-even in the most dire of circumstances-a "boundless optimism": How could their situation go anywhere but up? How could they imagine the Holocaust? Translating-giving the reader her grandmother's fluent detailed prose-Renata Polt has provided a major primary source work of Holocaust history, which is rare and heartbreaking.

HANNAH MERKER (January / February 1999)

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