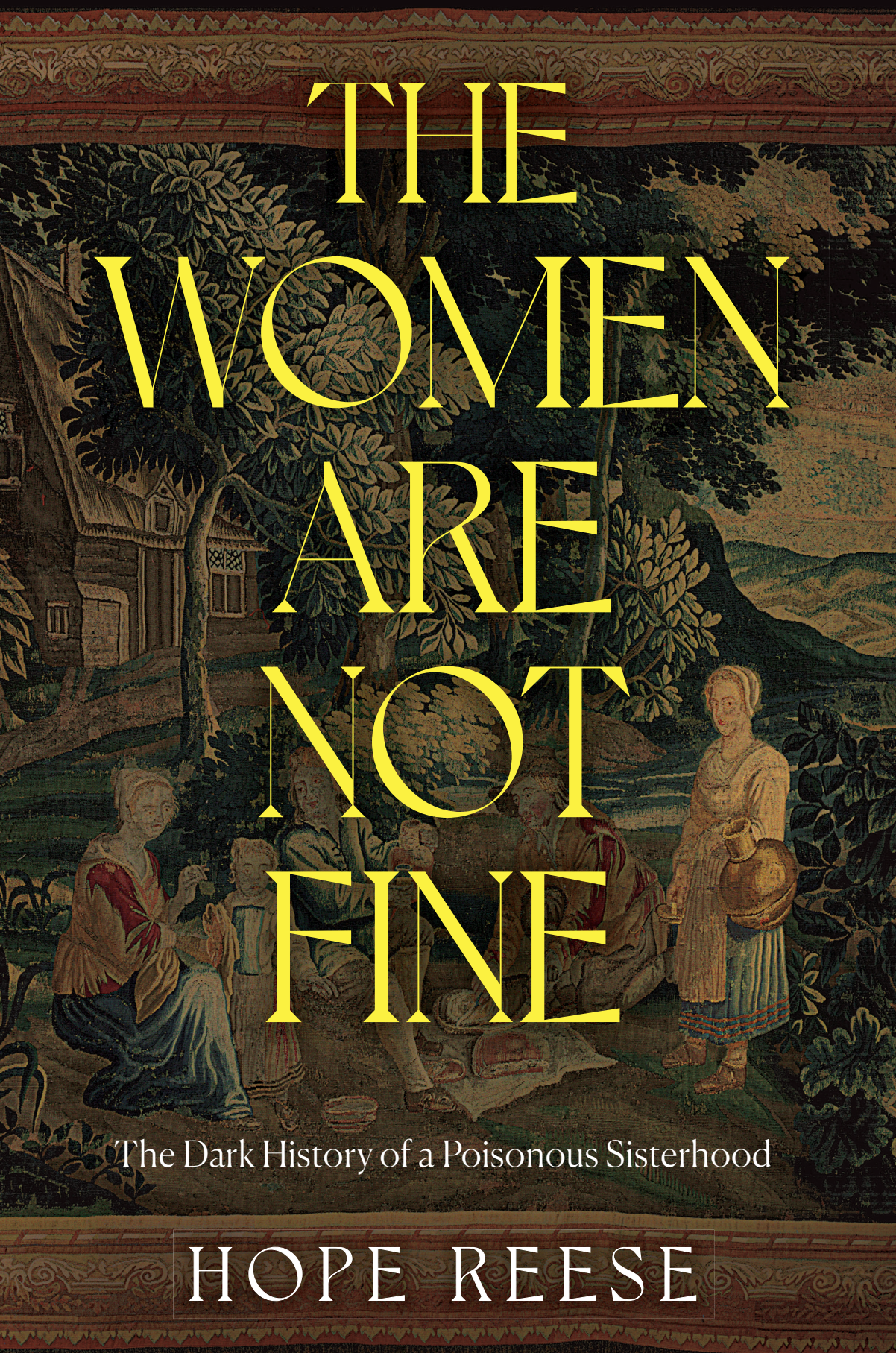

THE WOMEN ARE NOT FINE
The Dark History of a Poisonous Sisterhood
HOPE REESE

I didn't yet realize it, but I had just begun a quest that would come to absorb me for years – leading me to the village where these women were born and raised, to the courthouse where they stood trial and to the very home of a poison-maker.

The question of *why* now possessed me. *What had it taken for these women to kill?*

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To any woman who has ever searched for a way out

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A Note on Terms

On names

There are dozens of characters in this story, and to say that the names can get confusing is a gross understatement. Not only do many of the women's first names repeat – among our primary suspects are multiple Rozálias, Márias and Juliannas – but the last names do as well. Some of the male victims have the entirely same full name; three of them are called Lajos Takács, for instance.

Some of the suspects and victims share exactly the same names too. Mária Kardos is both the elderly employer who was poisoned in 1911 and the woman on trial for poisoning her son and husband in the 1920s.

To further confuse things, the women have both married names and maiden names. Some of the women's maiden names are the same as other women's married names – Rozália Kiss, for example. And, since some of the women were married more than once, they may have had multiple married names.

In this book, I have decided to refer to the women by their married names. They may not have approved of this choice – they balked at hearing these married names in court – but these are the names that were used in the official

investigations and in the trials. These are the names that most often come up in archival research, too, though their use is not always consistent.

To help clarify things, I have provided a character tree overleaf, on pages xii–xiii.

On the term 'angelmakers'

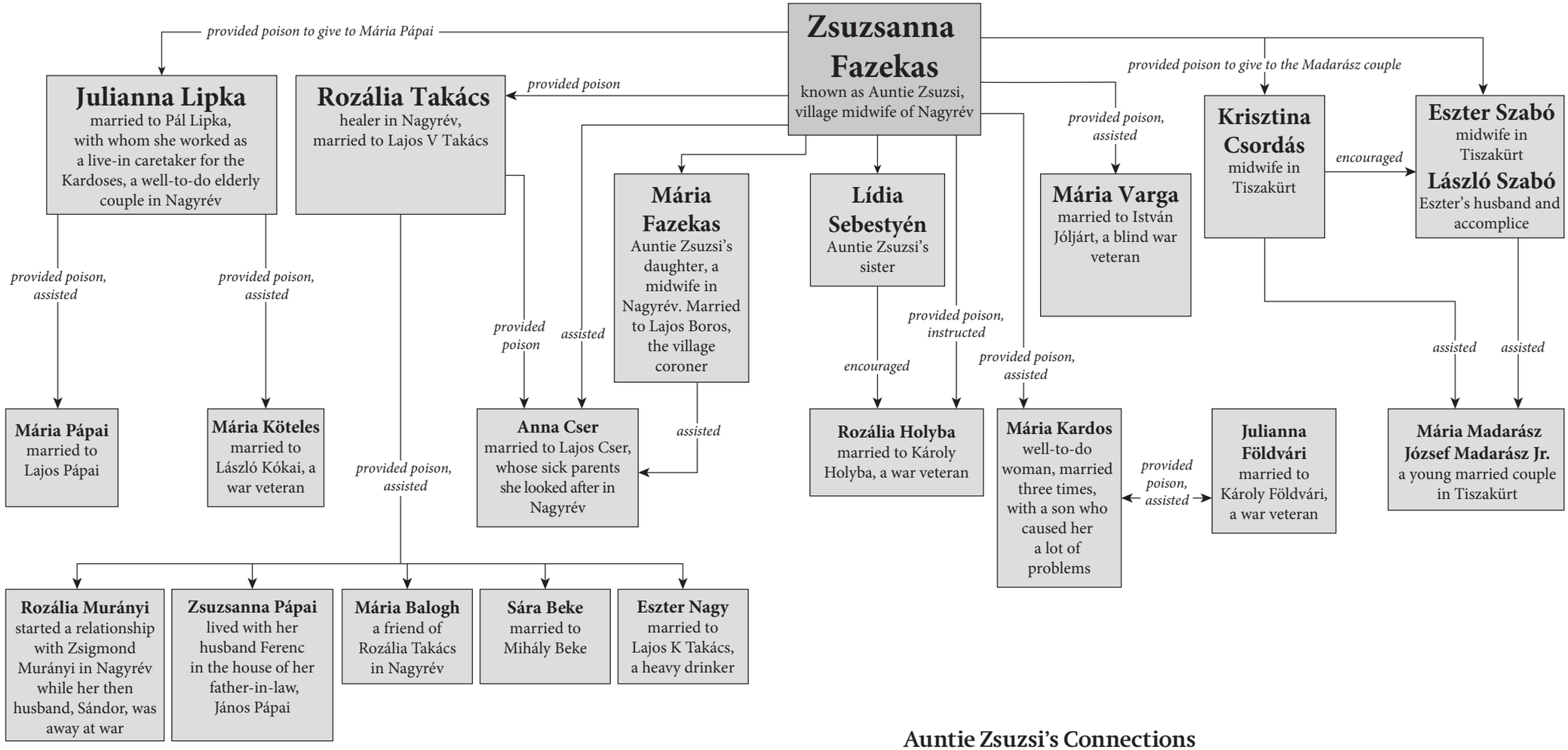
The term 'angelmakers' has been applied to many female serial killers.[1] But in the Hungarian language it means 'one who turns babies into "angels"', according to historian Judith Szapor. It dates to at least 1884, as seen in the painting *Angel-Maker*[2] by Ottó Baditz.

Szapor told me that when she first heard 'angelmaker' being used in reference to these women who had poisoned their husbands, she felt 'cognitive dissonance'. Another historian, Béla Bodó, suggests that 'angelmaker' should refer only to the midwife, Zsuzsanna Fazekas.

Nevertheless, 'angelmakers' is widely used to refer to the group of women from Nagyrév who poisoned their husbands. Multiple articles (and the Wikipedia page) call them the 'Angelmakers of Nagyrév'. Dutch filmmaker Astrid Bussink's 2005 short documentary on the subject is called *The Angelmakers*.[3] Jessica Gregson's 2007 novel *The Angel Makers* is loosely based on this true story. Patti McCracken's recent non-fiction book on this subject has the same title. There are a couple of theories about why the so-called 'Angelmakers of Nagyrév' became known as such. One is that the midwife was deemed an 'angelmaker',

because she was involved in abortions before she began the poisonings.[4] Another possibility is that the men who were poisoned were later considered 'angels'.[5] Either way, the term 'angelmakers' was used in the context of the Tiszazug poisonings for the first time in August 1929, in the local newspaper,[6] and continued to be used in the media thereafter.

However, because the term 'angelmakers' has a double meaning, I have chosen to use 'women of Nagyrév' to broadly refer to these women in the Tiszazug region who killed their husbands.



Auntie Zsuzsi's Connections

Auntie Zsuzsi, a midwife in the village of Nagyrév in rural Hungary, was a key figure in the greatest female-led mass poisoning in modern history, which led to the deaths of up to 300 people. This chart shows some of her connections in Nagyrév and the neighbouring village of Tiszakürt, which feature in this book. There were likely many more, but they cannot be confirmed.

‘When one feels desperate, one can do many things.’

—Mária Kardos, speaking to Judge Fuchs

Introduction

The women of Nagyrév were desperate.

In this small Hungarian village, under the shadow of World War I, many women were struggling to survive. They were suffering silently at the hands of their husbands – some of whom were veterans, some of them with PTSD, some of them addicted to alcohol and many of them violent. These were poor women, from poor farming families. They saw no way out.

But then, over time, a new idea began to take hold among the women – one that seemingly offered them a chance to change their fates. It started with whisperings, rumours of a few terrible deeds, but eventually it spread among an entire network of women who realized they did possess some power after all. They rose into this power, forever changing their lives and the trajectory of history.

In the spring of 2018, I ended up in Budapest, mostly on a whim. I had been working as a freelance writer in Louisville, Kentucky and was drawn by the idea of spending hours reading and writing in Budapest's glamorous cafés, soaking in its ancient Turkish baths and traipsing through beautiful old neighbourhoods. I booked a flight to Budapest, a six-week trip with no agenda. With no real plan, and knowing

no one, I wandered. The city's blend of charm and grit captivated me.

A year later, I returned to Hungary – this time planning to spend three months, the maximum for a tourist visa. On one of my first evenings back, I stumbled upon an open-mic night. These Monday-evening gatherings, a staple for the international community, began with amateur acoustic performances and ended at a pub, where groups of newcomers and veterans kept the party going. Here, in one of these dirty ruin bars, I struck up a conversation with a guy I'll call Zoltán. Born in New Zealand to a mother from Greece and a father from Hungary, he was compact, sturdy and animated, with a long, unruly mane of brown hair. In the dim light of this Budapestian dive, he started talking about his family – and told me a wild story.

In the 1960s, Zoltán said, his grandmother had poisoned her husband in a Hungarian village. His grandfather survived the poisoning episode, but his wife wound up with a 25-year prison sentence. Consequently, Zoltán's father, and his father's siblings, had grown up in a household without their mother, who was locked behind bars.

Zoltán then told me he believed his grandmother's actions were inspired by an earlier generation of poisoners in Hungary. 'Look up the Angelmakers,' he urged me.

I did, and here's what I found: a midwife; a group of women – most of them wives, most of them mothers – in the village of Nagyrév at the dawn of the 20th century; and the deadliest female-led poisoning epidemic in history.

For days after my chance meeting with Zoltán, the women of Nagyrév were on my mind. Why did they do what

they did? How did these murders spin out of control? How did these women get away with their crimes for two decades?

I began asking around, bringing up the subject with Hungarians I met in Budapest. While the story had garnered international attention at the time – it even featured in the pages of *The New York Times* – most of the people I encountered didn't know about it. Perhaps it had been overshadowed by the losses of World War I. Or maybe it had not registered as a significant event in Hungary's long, often war-torn history. For whatever reason, the women of Nagyrév and what they did had not stuck in the country's collective memory. Many of the Hungarians I asked were not only unaware of the scandal but also didn't find it especially noteworthy when I told them. This response only fascinated me further.

Several weeks later, I was lunching with a new friend – a Hungarian journalist named Róbert Kollár – who asked me if there were stories in Hungary I was interested in writing about. As soon as I relayed the story from Nagyrév, he offered to drive me to the TV headquarters at RTL, a leading national broadcast company, where he worked – his station had reported on the story several years ago and I could check out the old footage from the archive. As I sat down at one of the old desks in the office, a critical detail dawned on me: the film's audio would be entirely in Hungarian and I wouldn't understand a word. I scrambled for my iPhone and hit 'record' as the clip began to play, so I could play back the audio later.

Later that week, I sat down with Gábor Krupa, a Hungarian man I had recently begun teaching English

in weekly one-to-one sessions. Before this week's lesson, I had asked Gábor to translate the recording – now stored in an MP4 file labelled 'poisoning' – into English, as his homework. This would be a good opportunity for us to edit his grammar together, I'd said. Today, Gábor couldn't wait to tell me something. 'Hope, my grandmother lives in the village of Nagyrév,' he said. 'I can drive you there.'

I didn't yet realize it, but I had just begun a quest that would come to absorb me for years – leading me to the village of Nagyrév, where these women were born and raised, to the courthouse where they stood trial and to the very home of a poison-maker.

The question of *why* now possessed me. *What had it taken for these women to kill?*

The story flipped the usual script on domestic homicide. Statistically, men make up 90 per cent of the perpetrators of intimate-partner violence. And the reasons that men and women kill are fundamentally different. As Margaret Atwood once said: men are afraid that women will laugh at them, but women are afraid that men will kill them.[1] This is true when it comes to intimate-partner homicide – broadly speaking, men kill to punish a partner, or to gain 'control' of a situation; and while women may kill in self-interest, or for financial gain, the greatest motivator for women to kill is an impulse to survive.

The Women Are Not Fine is the true story of these women in a Hungarian village. It is also a story about what happens when women are neglected, when women are abused, when women are living on the edge of poverty with little

legal recourse for improving their lives. It is a story of what happens when women search for an escape. It is what happens when women come together.

The facts laid out in this book are violent. And, as this book will starkly illustrate, our society tends to hide stories of women's violence. We simply don't want to consider that women are capable of murder. The story of what happened in Nagyrév is a piece of history that still brings shame to the Hungarian village where it is set. It is a story many have tried to dismiss or deny.

But face this story we must – because in investigating the reverberations of these events through time, and their parallels to current events, we can come closer to understanding what ails our society today.

After all, the problems these women faced are not so far from our own. Beyond feeling stuck in difficult marriages, they had limited reproductive rights or control over their bodies. While there has been progress in women's rights – like access to healthcare, economic equity and protection from violence—there have been setbacks as well. Reproductive choice, equal pay and legal protections against abuse are under threat. And marginalized groups, especially, still bear the brunt of inequality, reminding us that these hard-won rights must be defended, not taken for granted.

The story you will read here has limitations. I rely on Hungarian court documents, police reports, contemporary journalism and scholarly research; every quote you'll see is from an official transcript and every fact has been checked against primary sources. Still, in many cases, important details are missing from the records, or the reports conflict

with each other. In some cases, main suspects died before there was a chance to investigate. And in police reports and testimony from the suspects and witnesses, there is always the possibility that someone is not telling the truth. There is also the issue of memory – in a village ruled by seasons, where many people were illiterate, dates were hardly ever registered. One of the main figures in the trials could not remember the year of her own wedding, when questioned under oath.

Even with what we *do* have, we can never get into the minds of the women of Nagyrév. We cannot know, beyond a reasonable doubt, what their motivations were.

What we do know, however, are the circumstances they lived in. The common hardships they shared with their friends. The forces that culminated in the greatest poisoning scandal in modern history, which lasted nearly two decades and killed up to 300 people in rural Hungary.

The women of Nagyrév lived in another time, under different conditions. Yet their stories – of poverty, isolation, lack of autonomy, abuse – will resonate with many women today.



A typical home in rural Hungary, photographed in 1937 by Sándor Gönyey.



From left to right: Rozália Holyba, Lídia Sebestyén, Julianna Lipka and Mária Köteles at the courthouse in Szolnok, December 1929.

Chapter 1: The Trials Begin

'The courtroom is crowded with people, the corridors are packed with witnesses, and the accused are full of sins.'[1]

—Zsigmond Móricz

Trial 1: 13 December 1929[2]

It was Friday the 13th. In Hungary, it was Luca Day.

In the village of Nagyrév, steeped as the local culture was in customs and superstitions, Luca Day was about both warding off evil forces and manifesting plentiful crops. This was a day when villagers traditionally performed harvesting rituals. They sowed wheat in a bowl to water in the days leading up to Christmas, sprinkled holy water or salt onto fields, scattered grain seeds around the house and farm – all to banish evil spirits and ensure a bountiful harvest.[3]

On Luca Day, people crafted, played games, told fortunes – they predicted who would become a spouse and how the weather would turn out. They prepared bread, cabbage, sweet poppy-seed rolls, which blanketed the long, wooden tables. All to celebrate Saint Lucy, a centuries-old Christian martyr who brought light into darkness.[4]

To the villagers, this was informally known as the 'day of witches'.

Women were the focus of this folk holiday: they were seen as both the evil force to guard against (the witch) and the ripe source of a healthy harvest (the mother). They could bring abundance or curse your land. On the Great Hungarian Plain, where Nagyrév is situated, many peasants believed that witches were responsible for the success or failure of crops, of cows' production of milk, of the survival or death of livestock.

According to tradition, women's role in fertility meant they should forgo most activities on Luca Day; so, they were forbidden from sewing, spinning, washing, baking and other domestic duties. These exertions could, so folklore maintained, prevent the hens from laying eggs.

It was a day on which women were supposed to be still.

But on Friday 13 December 1929, the focus for the people of Nagyrév and beyond was not the farm – it was the regional courthouse in the small city of Szolnok, roughly 40km (25 miles) from the village. There, four women from Nagyrév were standing trial, all of them accused of murder by poison. The penalty: death.

These women's names were Rozália Holyba, Lídia Sebestyén, Julianna Lipka and Mária Köteles.[5]

Rozália Holyba, 44, was on the stand that day for the murder of her husband, Károly Holyba, a World War I veteran who had died five years earlier, aged 46.[6] Her friend Lídia Sebestyén, 71,[7] was accused of being an accomplice in that murder and a perpetrator of other poisonings.

Julianna Lipka, a 66-year-old widow, broke and childless,

was charged with three killings, including that of her husband, as well as incitement and assisting murder. She was also suspected to have connections to other poisonings. When the police had first cornered Julianna in August of the same year, they had accused her of witchcraft and threatened her with a severe beating.[8]

Finally, there was the seamstress Mária Köteles. She had allegedly used a deadly flypaper concoction to poison and kill her husband.

This trial marked the end of the greatest female-led murder-by-poison crisis in modern times.

These four women were the first to be tried, but they were by no means the only suspects from the region. In total, 28 defendants were accused of killing 101 local people over the course of nearly two decades.[9] (A central suspect in the poisoning scandal, the village midwife – known as Auntie Zsuzsi – was conspicuously absent from this first trial.) But the estimated number of deaths likely fell short of the real figure, which may have been as high as 300.[10]

The victims, whose corpses contained arsenic, were mostly men.

That summer, upon their arrest, the suspects had been shoved into carriages in Nagyrév and shuttled by boat to holding cells in Szolnok. This nearby city was further than most of the women had ever ventured in their lives.

The four women on trial on Luca Day 1929 were presented as exactly the kind of witches from which a village like Nagyrév should protect itself. Witches whom society

needed to punish.[11] A local journalist called them 'simply bad, confused, hypnotized and sick women'.[12] Another claimed that these were 'mass killings', the product of 'mass psychosis'.[13]

By 8am, the streets of Szolnok were bustling. From near and far, hundreds of people had descended on the small Hungarian city. They travelled along the cobblestone roads, past the storefronts – a pharmacy, an iron workshop, an aristocratic supper club, a general store – through Kossuth Square, the city's main gathering space, which held the fortnightly market. Eventually, the crowd reached the Szolnok Regional Courthouse, flocking around the wide columns of the main entrance to this neoclassical building – robust, recently renovated and typical of late-19th-century architecture in Hungary.

The grand entrance to the courthouse was on lively Gorove Street but the building was also attached to the prison, which could be accessed from a side street. The design was a common setup that made logistical sense: prisoners could go directly from their cells into the hearings in the main courtroom. The jail, which maxed out at two dozen inmates, usually housed minor thieves – not murderers.

People had arrived from all over the country and across Europe – by ox-drawn carriage, train, bus,[14] or boat, in trips that could take days or weeks – to witness the courtroom drama that had come to dominate the news and been the subject of suspicion and gossip for decades. For people living in the surrounding villages without bus access, travelling to the courthouse was a trek of up to nearly 6.5km (4 miles) on foot. Those braving the journey like this had woken up at

the crack of dawn, in total darkness – a fact they complained about during the break in the morning's testimony.[15] There were no general weather forecasts back then, so anyone who wanted to get to Szolnok that day took their chances.[16] But attendees got lucky: the morning of 13 December was unusually mild for the time of year.[17]

To the people of Szolnok, these proceedings were akin to a big trial in Budapest.[18] The huge, raucous crowd herded around the courthouse, with people clutching tickets to the sold-out event. These passes had been available in a limited quantity of 120[19] (the maximum capacity of the large hall[20]), to be purchased ahead of time.[21] It was a hyped-up atmosphere; and as officers checked in ticketholders one by one, people without tickets begged to be let in.

The evening before the trial, the four suspects from Nagyrév had slept on straw beds, covered by wool blankets, on the stone floor of their small, dark cells – 2 x 4m (6.5 x 13ft), roughly the size of a small toolshed. In the early morning, they had walked a lap in the small prison courtyard and been given a cup of black coffee and a slice of bread. The prison had no kitchen, which meant that the women were forced to order, and pay for, meals at inflated rates from nearby restaurants.[22]

At 8.30am, several local policemen and four security guards began to usher the suspects down the hallway from their jail cell and into a 'suspect waiting room'. Police with bayonets strapped across their chests were dressed in long, double-breasted pea coats and the traditional hats called *kepi* (with a flat, circular top and a small visor).

As the women were led to their waiting rooms,

ticketholders began to squeeze through the foyer of the courthouse, walking up one flight of stairs to take their seats in the main hall. Police officers passed among them, monitoring the scene, finding and removing anyone who did not have a valid ticket.[23]

By 8.45am, the courtroom was packed to capacity. Even in this large courthouse space, there was not enough room for everyone on the long benches designated to the public; some were forced to stand in the aisles. Those who couldn't enter the main hall jammed up the corridor.

At 9am sharp, the four peasant women in black headscarves and ankle-length dresses were escorted into the courtroom by guards.

The hall fell silent. All eyes were fixed on these women.

The women stood in front of the judge's bench, their hands clasped in front of their laps – a gesture some perceived as defiant[24] – before sitting down on the front-row bench assigned to them.

Mária Köteles clutched her clean, crumpled woollen handkerchief, or *keszkenő*.[25] These small squares of fabric could be decorated and embroidered with a monogram and were usually folded and held on holidays and other special days – women would hold them and whisper a prayer on their way to church.[26]

Twelve journalists sat on a bench up front. Four of them were foreign correspondents – the story had made the news across the globe and reporters had now arrived to cover the event in person. They came from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany and even Norway,[27] and had been put up down the street in Szolnok's National Hotel.

Sat among the general audience were doctors, lawyers and police officers alongside white-collar workers and politicians. The famous Hungarian writer Zsigmond Móricz sat in the front row. Known as the country's Mark Twain, Móricz was a journalist, poet and novelist shaped by his rural upbringing in Csécse. Though an advocate for education, his reportage often cast the peasantry in a critical, condescending light, reflecting his own conflicted feelings about his roots.

Also in the front row was Viktor Benkő, the new pastor of Nagyrév and head of the village church. As such, Benkő represented one of the entities that Minister of Culture Kuno Klebelsberg blamed for the scandal – pronouncing publicly that, after the suspects themselves, the churches bore 'the greatest responsibility'[28] for the events.

Alongside all these male spectators sat many women, whose presence emphasised the class tensions within this social event: while the suspects were mostly peasant women, it was wealthy women – middle- and upper-class housewives – who filled the audience benches. These were elegant city ladies, who 'dressed and behaved as if attending a ball, concert, or birthday party',[29] their colourful dresses and jewels set in sharp contrast to the defendants' sombre attire.

The women standing trial were aged between 44 and 71. They were shrouded in black, the colour of mourning,[30] from head to toe, the accepted uniform at that time for village women in Hungary over the age of 40. These details mattered to the audience, to the judge, to the media. The accused were evaluated based on their dress, posture and appearance. These 'religious Calvinist women' were 'beautiful when

young; now they look like old grandmas. Here in front of the judge, they need to stay quiet. Need to lie if they don't want to go to jail,' the local newspaper reported.[31]

Once the accused were seated at the front of the courtroom, the trial commenced. The President of the Court, Gyula Fuchs – the 'judge' – oversaw the proceedings. He would give opening remarks, keep things on track, call up witnesses and, eventually, deliver the verdict. He also sometimes interrupted the lawyers during the trial with his own questions for the people testifying. Hungary's jury system had been gradually phased out by World War I, so by the time of these trials a lot of power was afforded to judges like Fuchs – especially over people with lower socioeconomic status.[32]

In the absence of a jury, a committee of three judges, led by Judge Fuchs, would discuss the case. Fuchs was part of the establishment and disdained the defendants. He believed these women were guilty: these were not 'acts of passion' but rather coldblooded murders. The killings were intrinsically connected to the culprits' 'female character', he maintained, positing that poisoning was an apt choice for women because of its stealthy, secretive nature – just like the nature of women themselves.[33]

The other major player was Royal Prosecutor (or 'Crown Attorney') János Kronberg. Kronberg, a judge who had previously served as a local public defender, viewed these trials as a chance to establish himself as an important figure in Hungary. And he did not like the defendants either.[34]

In his brief opening speech, Judge Fuchs instructed the audience to listen to the proceedings in silence and

to maintain order. The slightest disturbance or noise, he warned, would result in the room being cleared. The spectators sat duly alert, riveted.

Then, over the course of nearly 12 hours, both sides put forward their arguments.[35] While Kronberg made the case against the defendants, two defence attorneys argued on their behalf. The local notary and medical experts also came to testify before the court. For the last event of the day, the psychiatrist, Sándor Feldmann, took the stand to deliver his official report – declaring all the suspects mentally sound.

At 8.45pm, the four women were escorted back to their cells and the crowd dispersed.

Trial 1 continues: 14 December 1929

At 9am the following day, the trial picked back up.[36] Defendants gave their testimony and were questioned by the prosecutor, the defence attorneys and Judge Fuchs himself. No fewer than 39 witness were called forward. The previous evening, around midnight, Rozália Holyba and Mária Köteles had told prison guards that they wanted to confess. So Fuchs now offered these two women the chance to do so – however, when the moment came, they were silent.

At 4.45pm, Judge Fuchs stood up and announced that the committee, including himself, would convene to discuss the verdict. The guards took the suspects back to an empty room next to the courtroom.[37] The audience dispersed and began debating the proceedings among themselves. The

defendants' relatives congregated in the side corridor, along with witnesses, anxiously awaiting the court's decision.

At 6.15pm, the bailiff rang the bell to signal that the committee had reached its verdict. Everyone returned to their seats in the grand courtroom. The suspects were brought back in and the committee re-entered. The prosecutor stood, the defence stood, the audience stood and Rozália Holyba – whose face was swollen from crying – stood too.

Judge Fuchs turned to this first suspect and opened his mouth to break the great silence.[38]

Chapter 2: Nagyrév

'The Island of Nobody.'[1]

–Zsigmond Móricz

The village of Nagyrév was home to these four suspects – Rozália, Lídia, Julianna and Mária – and many others who were accused in the poisoning scandal. Geographically, it is nearly its own island. Nestled in the Tiszazug region of Hungary, Nagyrév borders the long, winding Tisza River – the second-biggest river in the country, after the Danube. The Tisza, where the people of Nagyrév would fish and wash their clothes, was once known as 'the most Hungarian river' because it flowed through the entire Kingdom of Hungary. Back then, there was no bridge to the other side, only a small ferry.

Nagyrév was, essentially, a dead-end village: one way in, one way out. A place no one accidentally stumbled upon.

Nagyrév is a vast grassland, a prairie, part of the Great Hungarian Plain. There are no mountains, hills, or oceans; in any direction, as far as the eye can see, there are flatlands. It lies roughly 113km (70 miles) southeast, as the crow flies, of Hungary's capital city, Budapest. On a pre-World War I map of the Kingdom of Hungary, it sits dead centre.