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Opening Extract from...

The Auschwitz Violin

Written by Maria Angels Anglada

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To the victims
In memoriam

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The documents at the beginnings
of the chapters are authentic.

The Auschwitz Violin

I

Guard Duty, Ghetto 6
Litzmannstadt, December 1, 1941

Incident: use of firearm

On December 1, 1941, I was on duty at guard post 4 on Hohensteinerstrasse from 1400 hrs. until 1600 hrs. Around 1500 hrs. I noticed a Jewish woman walking along the ghetto border. She stuck her head out between the bars and was trying to steal turnips from a parked cart. I fired my rifle. The Jewish woman was mortally wounded.

Type of firearm: carbine 98
Ammunition used: two cartridges

Signed:
Naumann
Reserve Guard
1st Company, Ghetto Bn.

December 1991

I always have trouble falling asleep after I perform at a concert. It keeps playing in my mind, like a tape going round and round. I was more keyed up than usual because this concert had been special: it marked the two hundredth anniversary of Mozart's death. The recital was held in Krakow, a city of wonderful musicians, in a makeshift auditorium in the bellísima Casa Veneciana. The extreme cold had kept us from visiting much of the art-strewn city; but at noon, when the fog lifted and the sun appeared, I was able to slip out of the hotel for a stroll along Ryneck Glowny.

The concert was dedicated to Mozart, but the pianist in our trio, Virgili Stancu, had reluctantly accepted the Polish organizers' suggestion to include Chopin's preludes for the first part of our program. This he did with his usual virtuosity, his fingers well acquainted with the pieces. For the second part, he and I played the Sonata in B-flat, which Mozart had written for Regina Strinasacchi, the violinist he had so admired. We stayed after completing our part in order to hear the orchestra's impeccable interpretation of the Sinfonia Concertante, K. 364. It was a wonderful piece that highlighted the

rich flats while subtly suggesting the dramatic nature behind the wise, graciously intertwined phrases.

My attention was particularly drawn to the beautiful tone quality of the solo violin played by a mature woman, the orchestra's first violinist. Her performance was extremely accomplished, and she displayed tremendous, barely restrained passion. I couldn't help noticing that her eyes grew sad when she stopped playing.

It was late at night, and I couldn't sleep. I could still hear the sound of the violin. Not that it was powerful, but it *was* velvety and full. Of course, it was not one of the instruments made by the great masters of Cremona. It occurred to me, though, that it might have been a violin from the old Polish school. Could a Mateusz Dobrucki of Krakow have survived so much ruin? As I pondered the mystery of the woman's violin, it struck me that hers was a darker red, not as transparent as a Dobrucki. It was not implausible that it was German, or Tyrolese, made by one of the Klotzes, the long line of violin makers.

"No, no, Climent. As you can see, it's not a Klotz."

Regina said it with a smile, but no joy lay behind the smile. It was the day after the concert. To keep my mind off the performance, I'd buried myself the night before in an excellent thriller by Eric Ambler, always a

guarantee of deep, peaceful sleep, but I had decided that I would ask the violinist about the origins of her instrument.

We met at the city's Academy of Music (they don't call it a conservatory), where I had been invited to teach a class. I admired the oil portraits in the spacious vestibule: the whole series of magnificent Polish musicians, from the oldest down to my colleague Wienasky. Then I was led to a smallish room to deliver a "magisterial lesson," a master class as they call it today.

When the lesson finished, Regina placed her violin in my hands. I tried it, and the strings responded to my every appeal, like pliant clay being molded in my hands. It was marvelous.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to part with it?"

"Not for anything in the world," she replied. "Not even if I were starving to death. It's all that remains of my family. My uncle Daniel made this violin, made it to the same measurements as the Stradivarius. I wouldn't exchange it for any other!"

"Of course not. I can understand how you treasure it."

"No, no, you can't understand. You'd have to know the whole story."

A shadow of sadness swept across her blue eyes, accentuating the wrinkles on her beautiful face. She ran her hand through the tufts of her blond, dawn-streaked hair. Her breathing was fast and heavy.

We were unable to continue our conversation because I had promised to attend a performance given by the older string music students in the Main Hall. Regina came with me. The students played the Intermezzo by Penderecki, who had been rector of the Academy of Music for many years. The performance was followed by a reception, but Regina seemed to find it tiresome.

"Have you had enough of the party?" she asked.

The reception had hardly begun and I wasn't at all tired, but she had stirred my curiosity.

"It suits me fine to leave; I've finished what I came to do. I'll take you home, if you like."

She lived near the Academy of Music, and we decided to brave the cold afternoon and walk through the fog, which had again settled on the city. She invited me up for tea. It was a small, simple apartment: life was hard in Poland. I didn't mention her violin again; I wanted to distract her, talk about other things. She spoke of her son, showed me his picture and explained that he was living in Israel. But she didn't want to leave Krakow to join him.

"What would I do there?" she said. "He's a diamond cutter and has a good job, but Israel has so many musicians now, especially Russians. They could form a hundred orchestras! He'll be coming for the New Year, for Rosh Hashanah."

Right away we began to talk music. We discussed certain interpretation problems while we listened to a recording of the Sinfonia Concertante. She proved to be a superior pianist as well, and we ended up playing together—this always happens to me. The piano occupied half of her dining-living-music room; it was all one area. Playing together brought us closer than hours of conversation ever could have, and I realized we were becoming friends. For a brief moment her cheeks were ablaze, and I thought I could read, like a passing breeze, a spark of desire in her eyes. Was I being presumptuous? Was it just the music? My God, I thought, she's much older than me!

By the time we had finished the sonata, she was transformed, full of laughter. She closed the piano and was holding my hands with delight when the phone rang. She was in even better spirits when she hung up. She didn't have to offer an explanation, but she disclosed that it was her friend. "He's not a musician," she added. "He's an industrial technician, works at Nowa Huta. We aren't able to go out much together."

It was getting dark, and I had to make my way back to the hotel where Gerda, our cellist, and Virgili were waiting for me. Regina and I parted reluctantly and agreed that the four of us would have dinner the following night at the hotel where Gerda, Virgili, and I were

staying. I didn't want Regina to have to spend any money; she was an excellent professional musician, but I knew that earning a living through music wasn't easy. It occurred to me that we could invite her to Holland for a joint concert. I didn't want to mention it without consulting the others in the trio, but I felt sure they would agree. They too had praised her performance.

I offered to take her home after our dinner the following night, but she said it wasn't necessary; it'd be too late for me. She did, however, allow me to call her a taxi and let me pay for what I knew would be more than the fare back. We said good-bye with a warm, friendly embrace, and I thought for a moment with regret about her soft body and how desirable it must have been some years before.

She had spent almost the entire meal talking to Gerda rather than to me. They'd even wandered off together for a long while. When they returned I realized that Regina had changed into one of Gerda's concert dresses, a dark blue one with stripes that flattered her. I assumed they had shared other secrets as well, and the next day I learned that I wasn't mistaken.

"Regina was so pleased with your comments on the interpretation!" Gerda exclaimed. "And by the class you gave the older students. She was extremely impressed."

"Well, to be honest, I'm not sure how helpful it was. You heard how they played."

"But, Climent, you provided them with a new point of view; your approach is quite different from that of the academy here. She found it really stimulating, especially the part about cadence."

Gerda paused and changed the subject. "Did she tell you anything about her life?"

"No, and I didn't ask. I'd never be that indiscreet! Besides, I think it would have disturbed her. When she mentioned that her uncle Daniel had made her violin, she murmured in a low voice: 'May his memory be for a blessing.'"

"You're right," Gerda confirmed. "She would have been distressed: practically her entire family were victims of the Holocaust. Her mother and grandmother died in the Krakow ghetto, her father and older brother at Auschwitz, all of them killed by the Nazis."

How young she must have been at the time. How did she manage to survive? I could only suppose that Regina's love of music had helped to stanch the pain of all those somber shadows.

"She left these photocopies for you, material she collected from those years. She said you'd shown interest in her violin, and the papers would help you re-create part of its story."

I glanced at the papers, pleased that she had sent them, a sign of true friendship.

"Did you read it?"

"It kept me up most of the night. But she asked me to give it to you; it's all yours now."

We had convinced Regina to join us in a series of concerts, once we managed to work out the details. Gerda had discussed it with her, and she always gets her way. We had agreed to perform Beethoven's *Archduke Trio* in one of the concerts, and Regina would play the violin part. I was happy for her to take my place. Our agent, Gerda's brother, would arrange the rest of the details. Regina had rarely left the country, and some days abroad would be good for her. She would come for three weeks, she had told us, but no longer: "People are too envious of my teaching post."

Our concert tour was drawing to a close; one last recital in Warsaw and then we would separate: Gerda and Virgili would be heading to Amsterdam and I back to my studio in Paris, where I was scheduled to record a CD.

We were stuck at the Warsaw airport for more than two hours because of the fog, and I passed the time studying Regina's notes, her rough English translation. I perused a few pages and thought to myself, I'll send the papers on to Maria Àngels, she'll find this interesting,

but then I forgot everything as I concentrated on the notes. One name appeared often, and it wasn't unfamiliar. My colleagues had to warn me that my flight had been announced; I hadn't even heard it, absorbed as I was in the story of my friend's violin. A story I will never forget.