

## ***I'VE ALWAYS HAD A STRONG WILL***

**Dalma Holanová-Špitzerová (\*1925)**

The well-known theatre actress Dalma Holanová-Špitzerová performed at the legendary Tatra Kabaret alongside Milan Lasica and at the Nová scéna theatre with František Dibarbora. But her first role came in a waiting area for death, from which transports left for Auschwitz.

*“You were forever in the shadow of death, because these were times when many of our friends and acquaintances were being deported. To avoid being driven insane by it all we did theatre there,”* says Holanová-Špitzerová, recalling an atmosphere in which, for a while at least, it was possible to escape the sad reality.

By then the young girl had already been through an arduous, adventure-filled journey behind her.

When the deportation of Jewish girls began in March 1942, her father, a respected religious leader in their hometown, organised for his three daughters to leave Liptovský Mikuláš for Hungary, where transports were not yet a threat. Just the parents and two younger children remained at home. Two older daughters left first, followed by the youngest, 16-year-old Dalma. She made her first train journey to Budapest, on her own. It was very risky. Though she didn't have the right papers and couldn't speak Hungarian, she left forearmed.

*“Before the journey they taught me one sentence in Hungarian. I still remember it. Olyan álmos és fáradt vagyok. I'm so sleepy and tired. I travelled first class. I was a darling and they all wanted to speak to me, but I just kept repeating that one sentence,”* she says with a smile. When she reached the unfamiliar city she immediately ran into an acquaintance and reached her sisters. As refugees they had demanding work in rough and ready conditions. But not for long. Hungarian gendarmes uncovered Dalma's two sisters and came to arrest them.

*“Don't admit you're connected to us two, save yourself,”* whispered her older sister. But the young Dalma displayed the stubbornness and courage that have shaped her whole life. *“I'm their sister,”* she declared. They were all sent to a Hungarian assembly camp and soon afterward to jail in Uzhhorod, where their paths diverged. Dalma returned to Slovakia, to an assembly and labour camp at Nováky.

*“They took my sisters away. I didn’t meet them again until after the war. Both had been in Auschwitz and also survived the death march. But they were young and thanks to that somehow survived it all,”* recalls Dalma Holanová-Špitzerová of the only other members of her family to survive the war.

When she was still living with her family in Liptovský Mikuláš, young men from the Jewish labour unit from Liptovský Petr visited several times. Among them was the future journalist and writer Juraj Špitzer. Dalma was still a child then. She says they fell in love later, when they met at the third building of the labour camp.

*“She was the only person who knew he was going out at night, meeting Soviet partisans and bringing guns into the camp. After several months Dalma got a permit to visit her parents at home for three days. “I met a man there who asked me whether I couldn’t smuggle a revolver into the camp,”* she says. She succeeded, though doing so was extremely risky.

When the Slovak National Uprising began the prisoners stood, weapons in hand, in the camp yard. It was no longer overseen by Hlinka Guard members but gendarmes, some of whom, led by Sergeant Gabčan, joined the resistance. They disarmed the rest. *“I wanted to take part in the uprising with them but Špitzer told me they wouldn’t take women. He sent me to Banská Bystrica, where I would be useful,”* she says. She reached the centre of the uprising and the partisan group of Capitan Jegorov. They produced newspapers intended for the trenches.

When the uprising was forced back to the mountains she joined the partisans. Commander Kumok’s group lived in a dugout in winter. Brave Dalma passed herself off as a man in front of the Soviets. In the end the mountains and cold took their toll. *“If you don’t go down, you’ll die. You’ve got a fever of almost 40 and I have no medicines for you. You can’t stay here. You’ve got to pull yourself together and go down to the village,”* doctor Laco Kertes, a member of the partisan group, told her. It is scarcely conceivable that she made it in that state across the mountains around Banská Bystrica and all the way to Liptovský Mikuláš. She was helped by the fact she met another girl on the journey and they went part of the way together. But the toughest moment came shortly before her destination.

In front of her she saw the Palúdzka Bridge, German soldiers with bayonets on both sides. At both ends they demanded her papers. *“I just had partisan ID, hidden in my shoe. I pulled it out and walked along the middle of the bridge. When a soldier wanted to*

*see my papers I waved the partisan ID at him merrily. He let me pass. Fortunately he hadn't looked at it," she says.*

There followed a period of hiding with acquaintances and strangers. This was a great test of character. She couldn't stay long with a family friend because of his jealous wife, who wanted to turn her in. However, when she ran into a guardist from the Nováky camp with some German soldiers he didn't give her away. She was sheltered by good people in Iľanovo and Palúdzka.

*"When I was in Palúdzka my father, mother, brother and sister were taken out to be shot. Nobody told me – they knew that I'd join them..."*, she says. When she later heard what had happened at Kremnička she collapsed.

She survived and when the war ended wanted to leave for Bratislava. She was sure she'd find her love, Juraj Špitzer, convinced he had survived.

Fortunately she reached Bratislava, where – a pleasant surprise – she met her sisters. Juraj Špitzer was in her thoughts but it was a while before they met. They had told her in Banská Bystrica that he'd fallen. In the end she did find him, though it wasn't the warmest of encounters.

*"He was utterly wiped out. Not only by what he'd seen in the uprising. He'd lost all of his relatives. They'd killed them all. He told me I should go my own way,"* she says.

In the end she and Juraj Špitzer got together, exchanging wedding vows soon afterwards. As a theatre actress Dalma Holanová-Špitzerová worked at a theatre in Martin, the Nová scéna and the legendary Tatrakabaret, where she appeared alongside the young Milan Lasica. When he walked her home they would philosophise about life.

One day an older, elegant gentleman asked Holanová-Špitzerová if he could speak to her. After a few moments she realised he was the interior minister of the wartime state, Alexander Mach, who shortly before – in May 1968 – had been released under an amnesty. He was most keen to meet Juraj Špitzer, whose journalism he read in *Kulturní život*. Their meetings gave rise to a unique collection of interviews between two erstwhile enemies, people who had stood on opposite sides of the barricades.

The year 1968 was a turning point in the couple's lives, and not just because of the encounters with Mach. Following the arrival of Warsaw Pact troops both expressed their opinions of that brotherly assistance. During the subsequent normalisation their views made them *personae non grata* to the regime. Špitzer had to forget about his beloved journalism.

For her part, Holanová-Špitzerová, who had never joined the party, in part because her father had been a committed democrat, was finished in the theatre. She was soon looking for work and briefly wrapped books in a warehouse. Though the Communists destroyed her dreams of acting for many years, they couldn't take away her love of the theatre.

As Holanová-Špitzerová emphasises, she stayed involved with it in roundabout ways, later teaching acting and passing on her experience.

An elegant lady whose biography reads like a novel, she is pleased that her daughter Zuzana Szatmáry took up the baton of journalism from her husband, while her grandson, Michael Szatmáry, inherited her love of theatre. She keeps up with Michael's stand-up career and new forms of drama.

Students to whom she taught the fundamentals of acting have also found success and she remembers all the talents who have passed through her hands. However, the first name she refers to is that of actress Táňa Pauhofová. It was a special moment for her when, following the Velvet Revolution, she travelled with her child acting pupils to an international competition in France, where they took first prize. After everything, this was extremely gratifying.

*"I guess I've been lucky since my birth. I've always, always had a strong will. And that will has helped me my whole life. In everything."*

*Text by Soňa Gyarfašová*