

A young girl tells her war story - and an author confronts the taboos of our common past



Judit Kováts:

Denied

2012, novel, 255 pages

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“You can’t free yourself of the past. You have to confront it.”

**A young girl in World War II.
The story as it was never told before.**

History stands unveiled in this absolutely remarkable novel which **breaks taboos and confronts** whole generations' unwillingness and lack of ability to look at themselves and to finally face up to what REALLY happened in that war.

**Millions died in that war.
She was “only” taken away, made a slave and raped body and soul.
She survived.
Will her past – will OUR past – ever yield peace?
Will there ever be closure?**

**A very direct, extremely readable storytelling.
A picture of the war more authentic than any history book or archive material.**
Written as **a fictive memoir entirely based on authentic events**, the matter-of-fact, yet captivating storytelling brings us to the front rows of the tragic and life-changing spectacle and experience of World War II Hungary, through **the personal destiny of a young girl, Anna**. And while doing so, in a way it also makes us seriously reflect on the necessity of finally confronting a past too long denied.

The novel reminds us of Elie Wiesel’s words: we are not guilty of our fathers’ sins but we have a duty to deal with our past in a responsible manner.

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Excerpt from the novel



We didn't wait until the afternoon that Sunday but gathered outside straight after church and discussed events in little groups. They'd put seals on Jews' houses but not on their ovens, stables or pens.

"Whatever's happened, the livestock have to be fed," someone said. "We should at least take care of our neighbours' animals."

"The bread will still have to be taken out of the Goldbergers' oven and taken to the school!" someone else continued.

"That could get us into all kinds of trouble," our mother worried. "One of the policemen threatened to throw Auntie Mari in with the rest of them because she cried when she saw them all being marched past."

They were being taken to their first collection point in the garden attached to the school that stretched all the way down to the main road.

"The police and gendarmes aren't from around these parts so how would they know what's on the other side of the fence at the bottom of the school garden and that you can get there through the bushes without being spotted?" they challenged our mother.

When someone came up with the idea that a young person or a child would be much less obvious, I and my brother put our hands up right away and said we'd be happy to go. Bolts of lightning shot from our mother's eyes but she didn't want to forbid us because the others all jumped at our offer.

We set off with two enormous loaves of bread on our exciting adventure - because that's all it seemed to us. The grown-ups all talked at the same time and kept repeating instructions about where we should go as if trying to reassure themselves they had done the right thing by not offering to go instead of us. My brother Laci and I very rarely agreed on anything but the minute we managed to get free of them, we both said how irritating it was because we had enough sense to know the way to the main road.

We pushed our way through waist-high wolfberry and elderberry bushes along the bottom of the gardens and managed to get to the back fence of the school without being seen. We squinted through the gaps and saw Uncle Icik and Ernő first and then the two Goldberger boys, Ori and Dávid. I looked to see if Eta was anywhere but I couldn't spot her in the crowd. Some people sat on the ground with their bags,

others stood around and the children either whined or stood next to their mothers looking bored and pretty much indifferent to everything that was going on around them. There were bundles of belongings all over the place of all shapes and sizes. The white cloth of the sheets they were wrapped in stood in sharp contrast against their black clothes because, without exception, everybody was dressed in their best outfit. It was April and so, adults and children alike, everybody had a coat on and Mrs. Löwinger wore two: a long coat with a short, little coat over the top.

Laci and I spoke in whispers to each other but I'm sure the policemen and gendarmes wouldn't have heard us if we'd shouted at the top of our voices because the murmur of the crowd was so loud that it swallowed up any noise we could have made. We called to them, quietly at first and our calls to Uncle Icik and Ori and Dávid got braver and louder but it was pointless. We wracked our brains as to how we could get the folks inside to notice us. Laci started to throw clods of earth over the fence but with no success. Then he found some little stones and he started to throw them at the Goldberger boys and eventually managed to hit one of them. They turned around for a second and then they could hear us. They came over to the fence but kept their backs to us to avoid drawing attention to themselves. We didn't find anything out because although we were brave enough to talk to them, all we said was what we'd brought them. We threw the two loaves over the fence and then we crouched down and ran off back over the fields. When we got back to the main road, we were massively relieved and felt like heroes. That good feeling only lasted until we got home because that's when the grown-ups started to ask what they'd said, whether they knew where they were going to be taken and what was going to happen to them. It was then that we realised we'd been too excited to ask them anything at all.

All the animals they left behind only had to be fed for a couple of days because we found all the stables empty one evening. Folks said that the council had confiscated everything to cover their costs. They took absolutely everything those people had. Quite who ended up with a calf, a cow or Uncle Icik's horse, Marcsa, everyone knew but quite how much that individual had paid, or even paid at all, no one was going to say. The small livestock got taken by anyone brazen enough not to bother.

All those ownerless dogs and cats were nowhere near as popular. Even if someone were to have taken a fancy to one of them, even with the best will in the world, taking them all in and feeding them would have been completely impossible. Most people had dogs and cats of their own and in most cases more than one.

The possessions – clothes, kitchen utensils, things from around the house – were all collected up in the village hall. Our Jews were just as poor as we were ourselves and the stuff they left behind was no different or no better than what we had. If they did have any valuables – cash, jewellery – they hid them in their clothes in the fifteen minutes they had to get ready and took them or they were snatched by whoever the first person was to get into their houses.

We might have lived in poverty although people generally had enough to get by but folks went mad when the news spread that they were handing out Jewish stuff at the village hall and you could go and ask for things.

I was the biggest and so our mother sent me. I really didn't want to go but it was never a good idea to say no to her – and especially not if she gave you an errand to run – because you'd get the back of her hand and she'd still give me a wallop even though I was a big girl by then.

The village hall was a real cattle market. You couldn't get in the front door for people pushing and shoving and they were mainly women who were constantly cursing and arguing. If someone came out with a new possession, the minute they passed someone would ask "she didn't deserve that, why did she get that?" and then they'd try to outshout each other in their indignation. I was nineteen and a big girl but they repeatedly shoved me out of the way I don't know how many times. So I just stood and waited for my turn. I don't know how many hours passed before I got to the front and all I could manage to say was that my mother had sent me. Someone put twelve little pillowslips into my hand.

Our mother was outraged when I got back.

"What a sorry lot! They hardly give you anything and they keep all the good stuff for themselves!" I was quietly pleased that she didn't blame me. She put her headscarf on and set off. She was soon back with a full set of men's clothes including a coat, trousers a jacket and a shirt. Our father had everything – a good suit, everyday clothes, boots – but if he'd gone around in rags, he still wouldn't have risked the shame of being seen in one of the Jews' clothes. Our mother, on the other hand, didn't appear the least bothered by this and held one thing up after the other saying "what good condition it's in, virtually new, as if it were cut to fit your father". I didn't want to spoil her enjoyment or, more honestly, I didn't want to put her back up so I just nodded in dumb agreement.

There were all kinds of everyday things in the village hall. There was stuff from rich Jews and valuable items from the Burger brothers, from Erdőhegyi, from Kőrösi and Harsány – expensive, fine clothes, furs, bed linen, porcelain, a gramophone, sewing machines, furniture, carpets – but they got taken straight to the granary and we didn't even get a chance to see them. They had real value because a carpet wasn't the kind of thing that you saw that often in a house in the village whether it belonged to a Jew or not. In fact, a proper floor was something of a luxury in those days. People used to put down painted paper instead of a carpet on the earth floor in their best room if they wanted to make it look nice.

Whatever happened in the village hall or later in the granary, the best part of the Jews' possessions – the more valuable items and properties – were taken by those who were closest to the fire: local officials, men in armbands, council members and their cronies. The council sealed the houses but before they did, they took a full inventory. Of course, it was obvious that the ones who wrote the inventory entered the houses in their official capacity and were able to have a good look around. If they had a chance to look around, they had a chance to find things for themselves and the things that ended up in the inventory were the things they didn't want.

Our judge had been at the head of the village for a long time and was respected by as many people as he was feared. His position of superiority also had a great deal to do with the fact that at least half the village was related to him or him to them – the point of view being defined by the situation at any particular moment and the fact that his brother also happened to be a gendarme. Everyone knew about his new acquisitions but he didn't concern himself with small things. The Jews' places were still warm when he stationed his three sons in their houses: Pista in the Goldbergers' place, Sanyi in the Vogels' house and Laji at the butcher's.

And then there was the other judge and I never knew how he became a judge because no one in the village thought very much of him or his family. He had three daughters: Joli, Ica and Gizi. Each was more spoiled than the last and they started

to appear in brand-new, pretty frocks after the Jews were taken away. They even wore Sára Löwinger's finery and showed themselves off at church. All three had their bottom drawers filled with the clothes of Jews. Not only did they not feel ashamed of themselves, they stuck their noses even higher in the air and never as much as noticed that they had the whole village talking behind their backs all because of a handful of fancy rags. I don't know how long for, but for a good while after the war was over the local gossips used to say that "if the Jews ever come back, the Soós girls will have to strip naked".

There was a great deal of gossip about the two judges back then and it wasn't idle slander because we saw what we saw and that spoke for itself. No one could ever deny that the two of them filled their pockets full. The council didn't only consist of those two because they were surrounded by I don't know how many who all had the same common interest.

As far as I could see the handout at the village hall, even if we only got a set of men's clothes, twelve pillowslips and a poppy-seed grinder, we became just as much a part of it as the others and so however much we had our noses put out of joint by what the two judges got their hands on, it would have never occurred to us to say anything against it. In fact, we didn't even blame them because anyone else would have taken advantage in their position. And anyway, they acted according to the law and executed the will of the state because it was the state that had decided to get rid of all the Jews.

At first they took the school to Kismező Farm and held classes in the massive estate barn for the first couple of days. Kismező Farm had been owned by Jews and stretched left from the cross and ran along the railway line. It was very close to the town. A lot of the villagers worked as day labourers there because Erdőhegyi, whom everyone called "master", paid well. When all the other rich Jews left like Kőrösi, Harsány and the Burger brothers, they apparently warned him to do the same but he decided to stay. The warning might have come too late but it's also quite possible that he had no intention of leaving. So, in the end, before they shut him up in the ghetto, he was held in his own barn with all the others.

The gendarmes, police and men in armbands were all types. The Goldbergers sent a message with one of them to let our mother know where they were and they asked that if she knew God, she should take them some food. They also said that if she went, they would tell her where they'd hidden their money and their gold and she should take it to them so they could use it to buy their safe passage. The guard told our mother where to go: along the railway line, around the back, she'd find a stretch at the bottom of the embankment where the brambles and wolfberry bushes ran right up to the back of the barn and there was no way they'd see her there. She could talk to them through the gaps between the planks.

Our mother was afraid. She liked the Goldbergers and she was tempted by the gold. She and our father spent hours debating what to do and they got Grandma involved and my uncle and they eventually decided that they should give it a try. Our mother set out in the evening two days after she'd received the message. She took food wrapped in a shawl and cut through the wolfberry bushes and brambles all on her own. She wouldn't let our father go with her and she pushed Laci and my little sister and me away, too.

We waited anxiously for her to return but she was gone for ages and it was completely dark by the time she got back. Her eyes filled with tears as she told us what she'd seen. *Unbelievable. Such things don't exist*, I thought to myself. *She's exaggerated the truth or she could have even invented the whole thing.*

She'd had a clear view into the barn where women stood around shouting and crying and all of them were completely naked. They tried to hide behind each other because the guards stood staring at them and barking at them to dance but all the women could do was to bow their heads and try somehow to cover their intimate parts with their hands. Then the guards started to prod and push the ones at the front and laughed and jeered as they began to jig around with pathetic, clumsy movements.

"They were just like animals because a human being would never do such a thing. I thought my heart would break in two at the sight of something so awful! I'm not going there again!" she said.

Translated by Ralph Berkin