

THE OPERA DINNER CLUB

By Debra H. Goldstein

Chapter 1 – And The Opera Played On - 1986

After the door to the memory unit slammed shut behind us, the male nurse, whose name tag said Peter, guided me down the hall to octogenarian Melinda Brooks' room. From where we were, I could hear the notes of what had to be a recording of a harmonious operatic piece. The soaring music reached a crescendo as we reached the last room on the hall.

“*La Boheme*,” I said.

The nurse shrugged. “I’m not familiar with that song. Except for Mrs. Brooks, everyone around here seems fixated on big band or 1940’s music.”

I listened more closely as a different song from *La Boheme* began. “She’s listening to the score from a famous opera.”

“Well,” he said, “it must have some special meaning for her. She runs it on a loop all day. It’s gotten to the point that most of us treat it as white noise. Come to think of it though, you might want to lower the sound, but keep it on when you’re talking to her. Except for mealtime, she gets agitated when she doesn’t hear it. Part of her dementia, I guess.”

I wondered how far her dementia had progressed. Perhaps my trip would end up being futile.

As if Peter read my mind, he said, "Except for when someone turns off her music, she's a sweet lady. She spends the day sitting by the window with her music playing as she fluctuates from being lost in her own world to being sharp as a tack."

Peter opened the door to her room and walked in ahead of me. "Mrs. Brooks, you have a guest."

She turned her head away from the window and stared at me. If blue eyes could twinkle amidst a wrinkled face, hers did. "Helen," she said, reaching her blue-veined hand out to me. "It's been a long time. I've missed you."

I didn't know how to answer her seeming recognition of me, but Peter knelt by her chair. He gently put his hand on her arm and said, "Mrs. Brooks, this is that reporter I told you was coming to visit. The one who wants to interview you for a story she's writing. Your daughter said you agreed to talk to her. Is that still okay?"

"Oh, yes, Ari. I'm thrilled someone is finally willing to look into the mystery of which member of our opera dinner group turned the Rothmans in to the Nazis."

Rising, Peter spoke softly to me. "Not a good sign when she calls me Ari. I think it may be one of those days where one minute she mumbles memories from her past and the next, she's in the room with you. If you need me, I'll be at the nurse's station."

"Thanks," I answered.

I pulled the only other chair in the room closer to Mrs. Brooks' recliner. Seated, I placed my tape recorder near a plate of cookies lying on a small marble inlaid table next to her chair. "I'm going to record our conversation. Is that alright?" At this point, getting her permission was a mere formality. I pushed the record button and said, "Today is March 1, 1986. My name is Jessica Helen Rothman and I'm conducting an interview with Ms. Melinda Brooks."

When I paused to take a breath, Mrs. Brooks looked more closely at me. “You’re not my Helen, are you?”

“No, ma’am. I’m not the one you’re thinking of. The Helen Rothman you knew was my grandmother.”

She looked me up and down and then matter-of-factly said, “You have her violet eyes.”

“I’ve been told that.”

With her gnarled hands, Mrs. Brooks carefully picked up the plate of cookies and offered it to me. “The food here leaves something to be desired, but these are quite good.”

I accepted a chocolate chip one. She picked oatmeal raisin, before returning the plate to the table. She was right about them. We both munched our cookies. Only after Mrs. Brooks wiped a crumb from her lip did she speak again. “What makes you want to interview an old woman about her memories? Are you searching for your Jewish roots?”

“In a way, I am. My father recently died.”

“My condolences,” she said. “And that prompted you to learn more about your heritage?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Why is that?” Mrs. Brooks asked.

“Because,” I said, “Other than occasionally mentioning that his parents were wealthy patrons of the arts in Vienna, my father never wanted to talk about them. Just before he died, apparently realizing it was his last chance, he decided to share his family history with me.”

Mrs. Brooks nodded. “That’s not unusual. What did your father tell you?”

“He told me that his father was a well-respected doctor, his mother a patron of the arts, especially opera. They lived in a fancy building in which they owned two apartments. His father used one for his medical practice and the family lived in the other. Because of their status, his

parents had a box at the Opera House, regularly lent art from their personal collection to the museum, enjoyed invitations to all the best parties, and had servants to care for them and my father.”

“All of that is true,” Mrs. Brooks said, “but that wouldn’t bring you here to see me today.”

“You’re right,” I replied. “My father said his parents were so involved in Vienna’s high society that they never thought they would be touched by Hitler’s activities. By the time they realized they were in danger from the Nazi regime, it was too late for them to emigrate. Through favors and bribery, they bought my father’s passage to the United States to live with two of my mother’s brothers and …” My voice trailed off. What I was about to say seemed preposterous even as I thought about it.

“And what?” Mrs. Brooks demanded.

I swallowed and said, “My father claimed that after he was safely gone, my grandmother launched one of the most devious smuggling rings of the war out of her dining room. He referred to it as the Opera Dinner Club.”

“He told you the truth.” Mrs. Brooks paused as if gathering her thoughts. “We were a diverse group. There were, of course, your grandparents, Helen and Wilhelm, and my sweet Albert and me. Although I often visited our permanent home in London, we officially were living in Vienna that year so Albert could teach at the university. Two other couples, the Edgertons and the Rothman’s servants, filled out the rest of the seats at the table. Tell me, what made you seek me, the only one still alive, out?”

I decided to be honest with Mrs. Brooks. “To understand what happened to my grandparents. My father hinted there was a sinister tale behind their being taken off to the camps.”

She met my gaze. “And the seed of what he said has turned into a journalistic challenge for you.”

“Yes,” I said.

Mrs. Brooks might have dementia, but at this moment, she had my number.

Breaking our gaze, she looked in the direction from which *La Boheme* continued playing. “You know, Helen, when the opera group’s dinner invitations stopped coming, we knew something was drastically wrong.”

Chapter 2 – The 1934 Opera Dinner Club - 1986

For a second, I thought Mrs. Brooks had drifted back to thinking I was my grandmother.

Then, she said, “It will be easier if you tell me what you already know about your grandmother and the dinner club and then let me try to fill in the blanks.”

I hesitated. How much should I tell or trust Mrs. Brooks? For all I knew, she was the group’s traitor. Still, if I didn’t share some of my information with her, how could I expect her to share hers with me? I couldn’t take a chance on her clamping up. I decided to volunteer only the basics. “I know that in 1934, my grandmother, Helen, attended a Salzburg performance of Richard Strauss’s *Die Liebe der Danae*. The conductor that evening was the director of the Munich Opera House, Clemons Krauss. Helen and he had met several times when she attended operas he conducted in Germany and Austria. They began exchanging letters. When she wrote him that she and her husband, Wilhelm, would be attending the Salzburg performance, he invited them to join his wife and him for an after-the-show dinner.”

“She accepted,” Mrs. Brooks said. “If you could have seen how beautiful she looked that night. Her violet gown exactly matched her eyes.” She glanced up at me. “The same eyes you inherited.”

From pictures I'd seen of my grandmother from happier times, I could imagine the contrast of her gown with her animated face as her dark chocolate-colored hair contrasted with her violet eyes and full red lips. As this thought went through my mind, I realized that Mrs. Brooks must have been there, too. "You were there?"

"Yes," Mrs. Brooks said. "It was a small, hand-picked group: the Krausses, your grandparents, two sisters from London, Lloyd and Victoria Edgwater, and Albert and me."

"Was there a connection among any of you?" I asked.

"Other than loving opera and realizing we had all attended some of the same music performances and fundraising events, none that any of us knew or could figure out," Mrs. Brooks said. "We were of different faiths and all of the women stayed at home while their husbands worked."

"How about a link between the men's professions?"

"Nothing obvious," Mrs. Brooks said. "Your grandfather practiced medicine, Clemons Krauss was a music conductor, Lloyd Edgerton had an armaments business, and my Albert taught philosophy at the university."

"You're right." I said. "I don't see anything in common except some possible ties to the university. That's a place my father occasionally talked about. He said his parents would drive him by the campus and tell him that he would go there when he was older. The war changed that."

"It did for a lot of people," Mrs. Brooks noted. "But back to the dinner. The food was excellent and as you can imagine the talk lively. Of course, as it was wont to do, the conversation turned to politics. While the men spoke of their animosity to Hitler and what he stood for, it was Mrs. Krauss who made a lasting impression on all of us."

“Was she beautiful?” I asked.

Mrs. Brooks shook her head. “No. She was a plain-looking woman with a beautiful soul. It was her words that reached our hearts.”

I couldn’t imagine what Mrs. Krauss could possibly have said about the opera that made such an impression. “What did Mrs. Krauss say?”

“She talked about her Jewish friends and the difficulties they were beginning to face in Germany and Austria,” Mrs. Brooks said. “When we asked what she meant, Mrs. Krauss told us how their activities and ability to travel were being limited. The few who were allowed to leave the country were prohibited from taking any of their money or possessions.”

Having read about these restrictions in my history books, I was not surprised to hear this. I waited for her to continue.

“You can imagine how strongly we all expressed our indignation before the conversation moved to a happier topic,” Mrs. Brooks said.

I cleared my throat, hoping the sound would convey my agreement and be enough to keep Mrs. Brooks talking. She appeared to be getting fatigued.

“Shortly before that evening ended,” she said, “when we were all in a very jolly mood from the abundant food and drink, Helen, who hadn’t spoken much after Mrs. Krauss’s remarks, invited us to attend a performance of the Vienna Opera the next week followed by dinner at her home. The Krausses and the sisters declined, but the rest of us accepted Helen’s invitation. Had my Albert known what we would end up doing because of our dinner at the Rothmans, I’m sure he would have found a way to back out of attending.”

Controlling my excitement so as not to overwhelm Mrs. Brooks, I said, “Is that the night my grandmother created the smuggling ring?”

Mrs. Brooks laughed. "We never considered ourselves a smuggling ring. Rather, we were opera lovers who dined together. It simply happened that those of us who were permitted to travel, as proven by our passports, would go home wearing or carrying various furs, jewelry, clothing, and money of Jews who hoped to escape the Nazis by fleeing to London."

The look Mrs. Brooks gave me reminded me of the ones made by my elementary school teachers when they wanted to make a point. "Thanks to your grandmother Helen's ingenuity, many of those poor Jews who made it to England legally or by using forged documents were able to start their new lives with some of their own possessions."

"Did my grandmother ever try to have things smuggled to London for herself?"

"Heavens, no." Mrs. Brooks said. "Unlike so many of us, Helen never thought of herself. Other than calling in favors to get your father out of the country, her only motivation was to help others. That's why she created our opera dinner club and masterminded its success."

My mouth involuntarily opened, but I didn't say anything.

"You look surprised that she pulled this all off," Mrs. Brooks said. "You have your grandmother's eyes, but not her poker face."

"I've never been good at hiding my emotions and reactions," I admitted.

"A pity," Mrs. Brooks said. "You would have had trouble being believable when you crossed the border."

"How did that work?" I asked.

"Very simply. Helen procured our opera tickets and then provided an after-the-performance meal at her home. When we arrived, the clothing, money, or jewelry would already be there. After dessert, she'd assign the possessions to be smuggled and would tell us who she had determined should make the next border crossing. She staggered our trips so no more than

two of us would be at a border crossing at the same time. On dinner nights, Bernhard Schmidt, the son of the Rothman's servants, who worked the meal service while his parents joined us, would help carry the bags and things to our cars or, if necessary, use the Rothman's car to drive those of us who had walked home."

I furrowed my brow in confusion at what Mrs. Brooks had just said. "I don't understand why the Schmidts were included in the dinner club. Were they the Rothman's servants or not?"

For a moment, Mrs. Brooks covered her eyes with her twisted fingers. She continued speaking only when she returned her hands to her lap. "Bernhard's parents, the older Schmidts, were more like family retainers than servants. They were German gentiles who came to Vienna and began working for Helen's parents when they were young. Helen's parents, when they became older and infirm, moved in with Helen and Wilhelm. The Schmidts came with them. When antisemitism became more than just a passing thought in Austria, the older Schmidts identified with the issues the Rothmans were facing and wanted to help. Because their passports allowed them to come and go freely, Helen included them as equal partners in our dinner group's activities.

"And their son?" I asked, wondering if he could have been the traitor.

"Bernhard was involved, as he needed to be, with some of the youth organizations," Mrs. Brooks said, "But like his parents, he was loyal to the Rothmans."

Not sure that this was necessarily true, I wondered aloud why Helen mixed and matched the smugglers each month.

"There was no real rhyme or reason," Mrs. Brooks said. "The Schmidts always traveled together, but Lloyd Edgerton and my Albert only made a trip or two. In the beginning they were supportive of what we were doing but used their work responsibilities and associations to beg off

participating with us. That's why Lloyd's wife, Victoria, fell into being my partner for most of my trips. In the beginning, it was easy. We'd cross the border at one entry point bubbling about the opera we'd seen and a day or so later one or both of us would come back to Vienna through another border point as our dowdy selves."

I felt somewhat confused. "What happened to the things you smuggled into London?"

Mrs. Brooks shrugged. "That wasn't our problem. While we were at the Rothmans, we established a time to put them outside the doors of our London homes. We had to be precise because within minutes of the scheduled time a courier would pick them up."

"Who was the courier?"

"I never looked." Mrs. Brooks said. "What I didn't see, I couldn't talk about. We all felt that way. At that time, everything was made easy for us." She looked away from me.

Eventually, I asked, "When did it stop being easy?"

Rather than answering, Mrs. Brooks looked back in my direction, but I knew she wasn't seeing me. It was like a cloud or film had dropped across her face leaving her expression blank. She leaned back in her recliner and shut her eyes. Thinking I'd finally exhausted her, I was about to stop recording when she began to mumble.

Chapter 3 – A Not-So-Easy Crossing – June 1934

Because Mrs. Brooks spoke softly, I strained to hear each word, hoping my tape recorder was picking up what she said.

Victoria circled slowly so I could ascertain if anything was wrong with her outfit or make-up. There wasn't. I did the same for her, but she stopped me before I even had my back to her.

“Melinda Brooks,” Victoria said, “I don't know how you manage to get dressed in the morning. The lines on the back of your stockings are crooked and you don't have the drape of your fox stole right.”

“What do you expect?” I pointed to my outfit and painted face. “None of this is me.”

Victoria laughed. “Today, darling, it is. You've got to believe in who you are if we're going to get away with this.”

I agreed, but inside I didn't feel as confident about smuggling another person's possessions to London as I had felt when Helen proposed the scheme at dinner. It was far easier to walk around Vienna without painting my face and dressed in my normal street clothing. Today, I wasn't me, but then again, in some way, I wasn't supposed to be. I picked up the leather suitcase. It was far nicer than the ones Albert and I brought from London when we came to Vienna. Then, I grabbed my purse that was stuffed full of another woman's jewelry and said, “Lead the way, Victoria. I'm ready.”

“Good.” She replied. “The car is waiting for us downstairs.”

The border crossing we were using today was close. As we waited in line for the guard to stamp our papers, Victoria kept up a running chat of nonsense. Answering her in an equally light manner kept me from fretting until we reached the front of the line and handed our papers to the guard. His serious demeanor and the scar on his cheek belied beautifully chiseled features and perfect blond hair.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Home to London,” Victoria said. “We’ve been here on holiday.”

He peered at our suitcases. “How long have you been in Vienna?”

“Just a few days,” I volunteered as he reached for my purse. I forced myself to relinquish it as if its contents meant nothing to me.

“A few days,” he repeated. “Then, tell me, why do you have suitcases like you’ve been here for months?” He turned my purse so I could see its brimming contents. “And enough jewelry to make me think you could stock a store?”

Flapping my hand in a pooh-pooh gesture, I said, “We came to see friends and attend the opera, but we never know what we’re going to need to wear, so we both tend to overpack.”

“The jewelry?” the guard said.

I giggled. “With the way the world is, I don’t feel comfortable leaving anything at home. I always keep my jewelry with me. Besides...”

I paused and smiled, hoping he would think I was an airhead. “With seeing our friends and attending two opera performances, I wasn’t sure which outfit I’d wear and how I’d want to accessorize it.”

“Women,” he muttered as he stamped our papers and shooed us onward.

Victoria and I didn't dare look at each other, but I bet she felt the same sense of exhilaration I did. We'd made it! I looked forward, in a few days, after returning to Vienna dressed as myself, to sharing the tale of our escapade with Albert. As much as the politics and tensions of the university were getting to him, I wasn't sure if he would be amused or horrified by my adventure with the surly guard. I also wasn't positive how Victoria's husband, Lloyd, would react.

She'd shared with me that although Lloyd was based in London, he'd cornered the international market selling some type of pin that was used in guns and rifles. From what Victoria told me, it sounded like he was making a financial killing by being a loyal friend to all sides of the ongoing conflict. One thing I was certain of was that neither Albert nor Lloyd would have been pleased if we had been caught.

Chapter 4 – Awake Again – 1986

Mrs. Brooks eyelids fluttered open. The sparkle from earlier in our meeting was gone. She again called me Helen; but, as she asked me for a glass of water, she seemed to know that I wasn't my grandmother.

“Thank you,” she said as I handed her the water. “I must have fallen asleep. I do that a lot these days. Why did you stay?”

“I would have left,” I said, “but you seemed to be mumbling about the past.

She took another sip of her water and said, “I don’t know what you heard or if it was even true. Sometimes, my mind plays tricks on me. I’m not sure if I’m here or back there.” Mrs. Brooks placed the glass on the table near my tape recorder.

Rather than reaching out to move my recorder in case her water spilled, I took one of her thin hands in mind and patted it. “The mind can be so frightening, can’t it?”

Her gaze met mine. “Knowing that I don’t know is worse than if I didn’t know anything at all. I can’t go back and change the past, but, for now, listening to my music helps me remember and focus.”

“*La Boheme*,” I interjected.

“Yes, *La Boheme*. It was the last opera we saw as a group. It was also the only time we didn’t go to dinner immediately afterward at the Rothmans. Instead, we were invited for dinner a few nights later.”

A tear escaped Mrs. Brooks’ eye and slipped down her cheek. When she ignored it, I reached out and wiped it away.

“That was the group’s last supper.” She paused and then whispered, “I want to hold on to my memories of your grandmother until I can’t. Listening to that opera keeps me sane.”

Considering I knew my grandmother had been betrayed to the Nazis, I had to ask: “Did someone in your group turn my grandparents in?”

For a moment, it seemed emotionally difficult for Mrs. Brooks to focus. Finally, another tear falling, she said, “Who else could it have been?”

“Perhaps,” I suggested, “Someone who worked for them, a family friend, or even someone from the arts world? You’ve told me my grandmother was involved in more activities than the dinner group.”

Mrs. Brooks pressed her lips together until she got control of herself. “No. your grandparents were careful in their dealings with people. They understood the stakes. Believe me, Helen researched all of us before we were invited to her dinners.” She pointed at me. “You think it was one of us, too, or you wouldn’t be here trying to piece together the history of your grandparents.”

Chapter 5 – June 1935 - The Last Supper - 1986

I didn't disagree with Mrs. Brooks. Instead, I asked what she could remember about their last June 1935 supper.

"It's funny," Mrs. Brooks said, "but the events of that night are very clear to me."

Mrs. Brooks began talking in a stream of consciousness as if I wasn't in the room with her. "Albert kept dawdling because he didn't want to go. I finally had to admonish him, 'If you don't hurry Albert, we'll be late. And they say women are always the ones who take so long to primp.'

Embracing me from behind, Albert nuzzled my ear. Softly, he whispered, "We are always on time. I can think of more things to do by being late or better yet, missing tonight's opera dinner party."

I gently twisted free, but turned my head and kissed his cheek. "We already told Helen we're coming. It would be rude to cancel."

He smiled as he said, "But you can't help it if a bad headache suddenly came upon you."

When I didn't respond, he moved away from me, but still made no attempt to hurry to get ready to go. Frustrated, I said, "Albert, I know you're not thrilled with being part of this group,

but other than that one time, Helen and I have kept you from having any major involvement. Besides, you do enjoy the operas and the food.”

He began pacing the room, “Things are changing, Melinda. At the University, there’s a different kind of tension in the air. Many of my students are open in their admiration for Hitler and his rhetoric. I worry for your safety.”

“There’s nothing you need to fret about. Victoria and I have gotten our routine down pat.”

Albert ran his hand through what remained of his thinning hair. “But what about that time the border patrol guard challenged you because your purse was filled with jewelry? You can only be lucky so often.”

“That was a blip. Once I acted like a brainless foolish woman who didn’t feel safe leaving my good jewelry home and who simply couldn’t decide what jewelry to bring to accessorize an outfit for the opera, he believed me.”

Albert disagreed with me. “Maybe it worked that time, but I don’t like that it happened.” I stopped his pacing by standing in front of him and kissing him again. “Albert, I love that you care, but you worry too much. Let’s get going or we will be late.”

He consulted his watch. “We’ll still be early. It’s chilly tonight, you’re going to need a coat or a wrap.”

At the Rothman’s door, Albert reached for the knocker but before he could rap it against the wooden door, Wilhelm threw it open.

“Albert and the beautiful Melinda,” Wilhelm said. “Come in. Frau Schmidt will take your coats.”

From behind him, Frau Schmidt, a middle-aged woman, wearing her usual white apron over a gray pinafore, held out her arms while Wilhelm, looking beyond us, welcomed another guest.

Albert handed Frau Schmidt his long dress coat. Despite it being summer, I decided to keep my light pink shawl with me.

Wilhelm ushered Albert, the man who had come in behind us, and me into the Rothman's well-lit parlor. Helen stood in the middle of the room with the Lloyd and Victoria Edgerton. Because my Albert, who could talk to the side of a building, immediately struck up a conversation with the man who'd come in behind us, I walked toward Helen, Victoria, and Lloyd.

When I neared them, Helen grabbed me by the arm and pulled me forward. "Melinda, come celebrate with us. Lloyd and Victoria are telling me they have a new granddaughter."

"Congratulations," I said. "Does this mean we'll be seeing less of you at these dinners because you'll be more inclined to stay in London?"

"Just the opposite," Victoria said. "This is my daughter whose husband plays with the percussion section of the Opera House's orchestra."

"The tall one with the flaming red hair?" I asked.

"Exactly." Victoria said. "What's so exciting is that so far, it looks like our granddaughter has the same red hair."

"Time will tell," I noted. "I guess that means you'll be here for longer periods of time now."

“If Victoria had her way, we would move to Vienna tomorrow, but I have a thriving business to run,” Lloyd said. “This isn’t the time for me to leave London. It’s getting more and more difficult to do business in Vienna.”

At that moment, Bernhard, wearing his usual butler garb of black pants, white shirt, and black vest, slid the double doors to the dining room open and announced, “Dinner is ready.”

Led by Helen, everyone, including Bernhard’s parents, proceeded into the dining room. The table, which was covered with a cream-colored tablecloth, was beautifully set for nine with pale pink leaf-patterned china, crystal glasses, and sterling silver. As always, Wilhelm sat at the head of the table, but rather than sitting on the end opposite him, Helen took a chair in the middle of the table. It was then that I noticed that for the first time we had seat assignment cards. As everyone found their places at the table, two things surprised me.

The unknown man was assigned to Helen’s normal seat. I stared at him trying to figure out why she had positioned him there. His black hair was slicked back and unlike the rest of the men who wore a coat and tie for the evening, he wasn’t wearing a jacket. While his shirt was white, it wasn’t a buttoned-up dress shirt. Instead, it was made of a rougher material and was left open at the top. I could see he wore a chain with a Star of David dangling from it.

Dinner was delicious. When we finished, Bernhard cleared the table. As he did so, I couldn’t help noticing how his fair features and blue eyes favored Frau Schmidt’s, who kept an eagle eye on everything her son did.

Once he took the last dish back into the kitchen, Helen put her fork down. “Thank you for coming tonight. When I began this group, I chose you because of your love of opera and the compassion and humanity I had seen in each of you. Things in Vienna were tense then, but they

are worse now. We have made a difference, but I am asking you to consider being part of a greater effort.” Helen looked toward the black-haired man. “Ari.”

Ari spoke in clipped English, which made me think it was a second language to him. “It is dangerous for me to meet with you tonight, but it is necessary to take the risk. Rather than traveling freely like most of you, those of us who are Jewish and involved in the resistance must fear a final train ride. Until that happens, we are working to help as many people as we can escape that trip. I understand that all of you began this group knowing that none of my people who have been allowed to leave Austria could take anything with them. I thank you for the difference you have made in their new lives, but tonight, I am asking you to do something that could be even more personally dangerous to you. Rather than taking only possessions across the border, I am asking you to consider taking children with you, too.”

As everyone digested both their meal and Ari’s request, Bernhard returned with two platters of dessert treats. When he left, Helen picked up Ari’s proposal.

“The children,” Helen said, “will have proper papers, but it still is a greater risk than what you have been doing. If you feel the need to resign from the dinner club, please do that now.” She waited for our responses.

As I glanced at Albert, and then around the table, I surmised the other couples also were exchanging silent messages between themselves. In the end, none of us left. Lloyd, though, raised an important question.

“We all have proper documentation to show the board guards. What will these children have?”

Ari answered. “Extremely well-forged documentation showing each child who travels with you is your own flesh and blood.”

“Still, if you undertake one of these trips, you will need to be extremely careful,” Helen said.

“At the end of that dinner, Victoria and I each took home a suitcase that Helen had prepared for us to make another border crossing with only goods. Although Ari and Helen had left the idea in limbo, there was no discussion of actively moving a child at this time. When Victoria and I met the next day to plan where and how we’d execute our mission, we discovered that Albert and Lloyd had had the same reaction to Ari and Helen’s request. Our husbands not only believed it was time to end our smuggling game, but both had vowed not to participate again or let us continue.”

“I gather you aren’t giving into Lloyd’s wishes any more than I did Albert’s?” I said. Victoria smiled. “Perhaps it is my stubbornness, belief in our mission, or not being fulfilled as Lloyd is by his job, but I adamantly told him he couldn’t dictate what I did. Lloyd argued with me that if I was caught, it would destroy our business because it was built on personal relationships with Brits and Germans. Lloyd went so far as to say, ‘Even if your involvement is merely suspected, it could put a giant target on our backs like the one the Rothmans, as Jews, already have. I’m sorry, but for our own well-being, this isn’t something open to discussion. We can’t afford to be associated with them in case in the future the Rothmans true anti-Nazi involvement is revealed.’”

Listening to Victoria rant about Lloyd’s objection to smuggling a child, I was struck by how similar it was to Albert’s. Being truthful, Victoria and I found the challenge of smuggling a child to safety exhilarating. We reached out to Helen for the bigger assignment. Despite her warning us again about how dangerous taking a child to London could be, we were undaunted.

As if the veil in front of her eyes raised, lifting her back from 1935 to 1986, Mrs. Brooks again firmly met my gaze.

“Why weren’t you afraid? It seems to me that Albert and Lloyd were raising valid arguments,” I said.

Mrs. Brooks answer was simple. “Because after a few beers we convinced ourselves that if we could rescue even one Jewish child, there’d be a place in our heaven for us.”

“I gather you were assigned a child?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Brooks said. “It took a couple of weeks, but Ari and Helen matched us with a red-headed ten-year-old child whose forged papers tied him to Victoria.”

“Did the child know what was going on?” I asked.

“He’d been well briefed,” Mrs. Brooks said. “He seemed fearless.”

“Weren’t you,” I said, “or were you more nervous than usual?”

“Much,” she said. “Perhaps it was Helen’s repeated warnings, or our own heightened levels of adrenaline, but Victoria and I were on edge as we waited with the child in one of the two crossing lines. As we fussed over him, I glanced in the direction of the other one and saw that the Schmidts and Bernhard were in it. It seemed strange that they were leaving Vienna at the same time as us. Plus, neither of them was dressed for smuggling. Still, it wasn’t seeing her without make-up, jewelry, or furs that made my heart stop. It was Bernhard’s Hitler youth uniform. We made eye contact, but he looked away.”

“What happened then?” I asked.

Mrs. Brooks didn’t answer me directly. Instead, other than a few mumbled words, she simply shut down. Trying to arouse her proved fruitless. With La Boehme playing in the background, she was somewhere in her own world again repeating: “We were careful, Helen.”

FOR PODCAST PURPOSES, THIS IS WHERE THE CHARACTERS AND MOTIVATIONS WILL BE SUMMARIZED AND THE QUESTION: WHO TURNED THE ROTHMANS IN WILL BE ASKED.

Chapter 6 – The Mission Goes Awry – July 1935 / 1986

1935

I nudged Victoria. “Don’t turn your head all the way but look at the other line.”

Of course, Victoria flipped her head to see what I was referring to. “What are they doing here? More importantly, what is Bernhard wearing?” she asked. “I don’t like the feeling of this.”

“Nor do I.”

There was no further time for me to say anything because we’d reached the front of the line. Confidently, Victoria handed the border guard our papers. He glanced at them and then stared at me. I didn’t need him to ask, “Weren’t you recently in my line coming from Vienna with a purse of jewelry?” before I recognized him by his scar as the guard whom I’d played the foolish women in front of in June. What were the odds of his remembering me, of being reassigned to this border point, and when there were two lines Victoria and me picking his?

The guard snapped our papers against his hand. “Where’s your jewelry? Willing to leave it home or simply not going to the opera this time?”

I smiled. “Both. My husband is home with my jewelry and rather than this being one of my opera trips, my friend here asked me to accompany her to pick up her grandson. As you can see from my outfit, there was no need for me to worry about accessorizing it.”

I kept the smile planted on my face even as the guard, frowning, roughly pushed his hand into the small of my back. “I think the three of you had best come with me.”

“Why?” I asked.

Before I could move in reaction to the stronger pressure he exerted on my back, our attention was caught by a commotion in the other line. I glanced that way just in time to see Bernhard raise his arm to that line’s guard in a Heil Hitler salute. His parents stood silently behind him.

“Come,” my guard ordered.

Victoria, clutching the child, and I obeyed him without another word, but I kept stealing glances at the Schmidts. They too were being taken somewhere. The difference was that rather than being part of the group with his parents, Bernhard, who was in deep conversation with their line’s guard, appeared to be being treated as an equal.

Eventually, we reached what appeared to be more of an office area. The guard left the three of us alone in the small room. Victoria and the child, who’d been remarkably quiet, sat on the floor with her cuddling him. Like a cat, I tried to memorize everything about the room. There was the one door, no windows, and only a metal desk and two chairs.

When I heard another loud “Heil Hitler!” from Bernhard, I knew the Schmidts were next door. After his shout, though, any sounds from that office were muffled.

Time passed. The child curled up against Victoria and they both slept. As I paced the small office, I wished I could do the same, but I was too keyed up to sit. Maybe Albert had been right about our luck running out. Or, maybe ...

Just when I thought I was going to jump out of my skin, the door to the office we were in opened. Instead of our guard, a man wearing a commandant’s uniform entered.

He grabbed a chair, turned it around, and straddled it. He pointed to the other chair. “Sit,” he commanded.

I did.

“My guard tells me you’ve passed this way before, but that time you were bejeweled and laughing about having attended the opera.”

“That’s very true,” I answered. “I often come from London to Vienna to attend performances at the Opera House, but this trip was different.”

He didn’t take his eyes off my face as he asked, “How so?”

I pointed to the still sleeping red-headed child resting on a now awake, but silent, Victoria. “My friend needed to pick up her grandson for a short visit to London and asked me to come with her.”

“I very much like attending performances at the Opera House,” the commandant said, changing the topic. “I’m surprised you didn’t catch the performance of *La Boheme* while you were in town. It was excellent.”

Victoria started to answer, but I cut her off. “I did a fortnight ago when it began its performances. I was visiting other friends on that trip, but this trip was different.”

“Because you failed to not make time for the opera?”

“That’s partially right. You see because this trip came up on the spur of the moment, as an overnight favor to my friend, Victoria. I didn’t have tickets or know if I’d have the time to go.” Thinking fast, I added, “Commandant, if you saw this version of *La Boheme*, you may have noticed a red headed percussionist. If you check, you’ll find he and his wife recently had a baby girl. Big brother here wasn’t doing well with the family’s new addition. Consequently, for everyone’s sake, my friend and her husband opted to give the new parents a breather. I came along because she asked.”

He chuckled. "I have four children of my own. I saw the performance and I more than understand what you are saying about our red head here." He stood, walked to the door, and knocked on it. When it opened, the guard stuck his head into the room. "We are finished here," the commandant told him.

The guard retreated and the commandant held the door for us to leave.

Snuggling the boy, lest he shout out in surprise when she woke him, Victoria quickly shook the boy awake, gathered their things, and led him through the doorway. I followed.

As the commandant stepped into the hallway behind me, he asked, "Who did you say you attended *LaBoheme* with?"

"Before I could catch my tongue, 'The Rothmans' fatefully slipped out from between my lips. I kept walking."

1986

After hearing Mrs. Brooks' admission from the past, I pressed the stop button on my tape recorder. There was nothing else I needed to know. This time, I was the one who walked out of the room.

The End