

Anna Nešporová

January 23rd 1920 – September 20th 2006

On 20th September one of the last survivors of the 1942 massacre in the Czech village of Lidice died at the age of 86. Anna Nešporová (nee Horáková) had an ordinary childhood in a very typical Czech village, but the courage that she showed in unthinkable circumstances was anything but ordinary. After the war she devoted years to making sure that Lidice was not forgotten, but it was only after the fall of communism that the full story came to be told of the close link between Anna's family, the tragedy of Lidice, and Britain.

Anna Horáková was born in 1920 into a farming family. Lidice was a village of just over six hundred inhabitants dominated by its Baroque parish church, just beyond the suburbs of the industrial town of Kladno west of Prague. After leaving school Anna's older brother Josef went to military academy and joined the Czechoslovak Air Force. Shortly after Bohemia and Moravia were occupied by Germany in March 1939, Josef Horák and his friend Josef Stříbrný made their way to France and then to Britain, where, like many other Czech patriots, they joined the RAF. Josef Horák served in the Czechoslovak 311 Bomber Squadron, first as a rear gunner, then as a pilot.

When the fanatical Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia and architect of the "Final Solution", Reinhard Heydrich, was assassinated by Czech patriots parachuted from London in May 1942, several thousand Czechs were selected arbitrarily for execution, and the village of Lidice was singled out for complete destruction. False claims were made that Horák and Stříbrný had been involved in the assassination plot. The men of the village - 173 in all - were shot against the old stone wall of the barn alongside Anna's family farmhouse, the women were sent to Ravensbrück, and eighty-one of the children were packed on trains to Chelmno in Poland, where they were gassed. A few of the younger Lidice children survived, considered sufficiently Aryan for adoption in Germany.

By the time of the destruction of the village on 10th June 1942, all Anna Horáková's Lidice relatives had already been arrested and brought to Prague. Because of their links with Britain, the entire Horák and Stříbrný families had been singled out for execution. This included Anna's husband Václav Kohlíček, who was shot on 16th June. Anna was spared because she was nine months pregnant. The reason was not humanitarian, but pragmatic. The Germans had already had difficulties making soldiers take part in such firing squads and did not want to shoot their own men for disobeying orders. Anna was taken to a Gestapo-run nursing home in Prague, where she gave birth a few days later. Throughout her labour, she did not call for a doctor. Later she would always say that she could not bear the thought that the first face her child would see would be that of an SS man.

Two weeks after her daughter Věnceslava was born, Anna was told that she would be taken for questioning and that would return in about an hour. Instead she was sent straight to Ravensbrück and never saw Věnceslava again. The child's fate is unknown, and it is very unlikely she survived. Anna spent three years in the camp. In the chaos at the end of the war, she managed to break away from the death march from Ravensbrück. Together with her mother-in-law, who had also survived the camp, she undertook the long journey home on foot. At that stage she still had no idea that Lidice had been wiped off the map. She found nothing but a field of rye where the village had stood, so thorough had the Nazis been in

removing all traces of Lidice. Sixty of the Lidice women did not return home, and it was several years before last of the children that had been adopted by German families returned.

Anna's brother Josef, his English wife Win and their two children, Václav and Josef, moved back to Czechoslovakia immediately after the war. They were the only intact Lidice family. Josef rejoined the Czechoslovak Air Force and Win brought up the two boys in Kladno, where the surviving women and children of Lidice were living. By this time, the communists were gaining a stronger foothold in Czechoslovakia. To Anna's horror it was decided that, unlike the other survivors, the two men who had fought in Britain would not be given a house in the new Lidice. Immediately after the communist take-over in February 1948, and just three years after coming home as a hero, Josef was sacked from his post in the armed forces. Win and the children returned to England, and Josef followed shortly afterwards. One of the last things he told his sister before smuggling his way across the border for the second time in less than a decade, was that she should join the Communist Party to protect the family from a repeat of the events of six years before. Reluctantly, Anna joined.

Josef rejoined the RAF. Tragically he died in a plane crash, flying for the RAF in England, a year later. Anna was not allowed to go to his funeral. She arranged to send earth from Lidice to scatter on his grave, but when she arrived at the airport in Prague, she was subjected to prolonged questioning about her brother – by now considered a traitor - and sent home. For decades the two halves of the family were divided. Win brought up Josef and Václav in Swindon, where she lives to this day.

Anna was given a house in the new Lidice. Much of the money for the new village, built close to the old Lidice, came from funds raised by the influential "Lidice Shall Live" movement that had been set up in Britain in 1942 on the initiative of British miners. Having lost her parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, husband and daughter - and now even her brother - she raised a second family. She was a devoted mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, but she also put untiring energy into keeping the memory of Lidice alive. For many years she worked at the Lidice museum and memorial. She felt an obligation to tell her story and would never refuse to talk to visitors who came to visit Lidice from all over the world. Even in her eighties she would often recount details for three hours at a time, always standing to show her respect for those who were killed.

The communist regime would use the "Lidice Women" - as the survivors became known - for propaganda purposes, and Anna was delighted when the fall of communism swept the "anti-imperialist" rhetoric away and meant that she could once again contact Win and her family in England without official disapproval. The two sides of the family have been close ever since, although Win's surviving son, Josef, today speaks no more than a few words of Czech. Anna's granddaughter Pavla, who has chosen to live in Britain, acts as family interpreter.

Anna was renowned for her hospitality. A typical example was when a group of ten visitors from South Wales turned up at a moment's notice. They were from the village of Cwmgiedd, where a film re-enacting the Lidice massacre had been made by the great British documentary film maker Humphrey Jennings in the months just after the massacre. She immediately invited them all to a lunch of pork, dumplings and beer, mobilizing various members of her family to help get the meal ready. Anna's charisma will be hugely missed. She was not only an important witness to one of the most cold-blooded atrocities of World War II, but also a person of immense humanity and warmth, a true Czech "babička".

Anna Nesporova is survived by her son Antonín, daughter-in-law Pavla, grandchildren Antonín, Martina and Pavla and great-grandchildren Julie and David. Her sister-in-law Win and nephew Josef are still living in England.

David Vaughan, September 2006

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