

Auschwitz Rose

A novel by Father Edward B. Gabriel

Inspired by the true story of Helena Citrónová and Franz Wunsch

PART ONE

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The ground rumbled, and the boy froze.

It was strictly *verboden* to be outside after dark, but that silly kitten of his had slipped out the window again and he needed to find it before someone else caught and ate it. He was being careful, making sure nobody saw him, but still... He was quite nervous. Some of the other kids he sometimes played with during the day spoke of creatures that roamed the streets at night, snatching naughty children and taking them to a horrible, horrible place from whence they never returned.

He wasn't sure he quite believed them, but some kids *had* simply vanished without a trace. Like that boy who always cheated at marbles. And that girl who had once offered to teach him what else he could do with his little man before it was too late, whatever *that* meant. And not only children either. Adults too. One day they were there, and the next... poof, they were not, taken away never to be seen again.

The rumble came once more, but this time the boy also saw a flash of light in the distance. He felt his little knees weaken and he backed into an alley, hiding in the darkness and in his haste tripping over an abandoned bicycle. The boy and the bike in turn fell into a pile of empty trashcans, causing such a ruckus that his heart just about leaped out of his chest. Somewhere above

him someone, an old woman by the sound of the voice, yelled something he didn't understand. He paid her no attention. He had much more pressing matters to attend, such as returning home as quickly as he could and to hell with that damn kitten. It was so skinny he couldn't imagine anyone wanting to stew it anyway.

But to return home, he'd have to get away from those creatures he now knew did haunt the streets at night.

The creatures were now so close that he could hear their growl. He had to get out of here before they got any closer and found him; the only problem was that he had nowhere to go. On each side of him rose tall buildings and the alley dead ended after about 100 feet, stoppered by a brick wall he had no hope of climbing. The wall hadn't always been there, the men in the gray uniforms had erected it the year before, but that didn't matter. It was there today, and today it marked the boundaries of his world, and today it meant that he was trapped like a rat.

His only hope was to run straight ahead, as fast as he could, but that meant risking detection and possibly capture by the creatures. His bowels constricted and he noticed that his bladder was burning. Tears welled in his eyes. He wiped them away with closed fists and fought to control his quivering lips as he resolved to go out with a fight. If the creatures wanted to take him away, well... let them try. He'd give them all he had. He'd been in fights before, nothing new there, and he'd always held his own.

The boy bent down and righted the bicycle. He had no idea if it belonged to

someone, but if it did, well maybe that someone should have taken better care of it. And besides. He had no intention of actually keeping it, he was just borrowing it. He'd return it the next day... if he still lived, of course.

The bike was much too big for him and the tires felt a little soft, but that couldn't be helped. Somewhere in the distance a dog began barking in alarm – or perhaps it had smelled his kitten, who knew? - but then came the sound of a slap and a whine and then silence. The rumble was getting closer, louder, nastier. The boy briefly considered staying put, or perhaps hiding at the very back of the alley, flattening himself against the wall where the darkness was deepest in the hope that the creatures would simply pass him by... but no. He knew that'd never do. The creatures were almost right on top of him and any minute now they'd smell him, smell his fear, smell his sweat, smell his blood, smell his unwashed body, and they'd hone right in on him. Nowhere on Earth was there a hole deep enough to hide from them.

He had to get out of here. Now. His life depended on it. Hesitating any longer meant certain death.

The boy stepped back about fifteen steps, holding the bicycle with trembling hands. He took a deep breath and silently wished for his father to miraculously appear and whisk him to safety. But knowing that he was on his own, he began running as fast as he could, pumping his short legs as rapidly as possible, mindless of the pebbles and shards of broken glass that cut at his feet. The bike felt a little wobbly and one of the wheels was clearly bent, but he had reached the mouth of the alley and it was time to go.

He launched himself on the seat at the last possible moment and emerged into the deserted street just as the convoy of trucks came around the corner. The boy looked to his right and was momentarily blinded by the headlights of the lead vehicle. The truck was less than twenty feet away and headed straight for him. The driver, a convicted murderer who'd been granted his release when he'd accepted to join the army, jumped in surprise and his first reflex was to hit the brakes, but he caught himself just in time. If he braked suddenly, he risked being rear-ended by the truck behind him and causing a chain-reaction of collisions that would probably land him back in jail.

The driver also remembered, in a flash, who lived here, who these people were, what they represented, and mostly what he was here to do. Running one of them over would simply mean one less to transport. Nobody would care. So he grinned and instead of braking, he floored the accelerator, knowing that he would barely feel the impact of running over such a puny creature. His headlights sliced through the darkness like a sharp blade through putrid flesh and he burst out laughing at the boy frozen in the middle of the road, the urge to kill that ran in his blood as demented as ever.

The boy's entire world was now filled by the light of those headlamps and by the roar of the engine. The creature had clearly seen him – how could it have not, with such huge, luminous eyes? - and it howled as it readied to devour him. In a moment it would open its maw and swallow him whole, and the next day his friends would wonder, but only briefly, what had become of him before returning to their play.

The boy sent up a silent apology to his parents for having been so naughty, for the anguish his disappearance would certainly cause them, and he prepared to fight and die. He'd try punching the creature in the eye, a tactic he'd used with some success in the past, in the hope that the pain would distract it long enough for him to get away. But really... what chance did he stand against such a nightmarish monster?

Acting on their own, independently of his paralyzed mind, his feet instinctively found the pedals. They barely touched, but barely would be enough. This night, barely would have to do. The tip of his toes against the cold metal jolted the boy into action and, without really realizing it, he began pedaling. He had to stand up and get off the seat to propel himself, and even then the bike's horizontal bar banged painfully against his crotch, but at least he was moving forward.

The truck, the creature, was less than six feet behind him. In less than a second it would be too late. The boy bent over the handlebars and pushed down one last time with all his might; the bike swerved to the right and the truck roared angrily by, so close that the blast of wind in its wake destabilized him. He fell off the bicycle, tumbling head over heels and disappearing from the view of the truck driver, who cursed and slapped the dashboard with both hands.

The boy disentangled himself from the wrecked bike and stood up. He'd banged his left knee hard and his right shoulder hurt, but he wasn't seriously injured. He watched as the trucks vanished around the corner, their red lights

trailing behind them, and he finally saw them for what they really were: mechanized contraptions, not demons out to devour little children. And with that realization, his fear suddenly vanished.

Trucks, not monsters. Trucks. Mere trucks.

Chastising himself for a fool, the boy dusted the grit and dirt from his clothes and wondered how much trouble he'd be in when he got home. Surely his absence would have been noticed by now. He didn't doubt that his father would...

Home. That single thought made him look up and after the trucks again. They'd turned left, which meant that... that... which meant that there was only one place they could possibly be going.

The boy ran after them with every last ounce of strength he had left, hoping he wouldn't be too late but knowing that he likely would be.

Adriana couldn't sleep. She had gone to bed almost an hour ago but sleep eluded her; the thin, scratchy sheet itched and her empty stomach wouldn't quiet down.

She had heard her little brother slip out earlier. She hadn't said anything. She had no idea if her parents also knew of his nightly escapades, but she'd have to tell them eventually if he kept this up. First though, she'd talk to him about it the next morning. Again. The boy was restless, something she understood only too well, but this needed to stop. They had all done their best to shield him from the madness that had descended on them all, but that had

proved to be a double-edged sword since the child clearly didn't fully appreciate the danger they were in. Maybe she'd have to scare him straight with the truth.

God knew, the truth was scary enough.

God. Now there was Someone she'd like to have a word with. The first question she'd ask him would be, where are You? Then, why are You allowing this to happen? If You truly are all-powerful and all-knowing, why aren't You stopping this insanity? Why not simply wipe those animals off the face of the Earth? What purpose could their continued existence possibly serve? She knew rabbi Rubenstein would sternly disapprove of such questions, but what did she care what that old fool thought?

So many questions, so few answers. She snickered in the dark. Who could go on believing in God when the Devil clearly ruled the Earth? Certainly not her. Her parents still prayed, and she prayed along with them so as not to make things even worse, but the truth was that her heart had turned as dark and as cold as the night outside. She no longer believed. Not in God, not in hope, not in love, and certainly not in her fellow man. Not in anything. Tonight, alone and hungry in her bed, all she believed in was the despair she felt.

She had almost drifted off to sleep when she heard a noise outside. Immediately, in the room next to hers, there was a thump as her father jumped out of his own bed and ran to the window. She heard her mother murmur something urgently to him, the fear in her tone chilling Adriana's soul through the walls, and his reply was just as urgent and as tainted with worry.

Adriana threw the covers away and found her slippers. Her heart was racing and her mind had gone blank. She stood in the middle of her room, incapable of thought or movement, her hands clasped to her chest, staring at her closed door as though expecting it to burst open at any moment. You always think these things happened solely to others, she thought, until such a day came as they happened to you. That day was today. Today she and her family had become someone else's *others*.

She heard her parents open their door but she didn't move. To her, it was as though leaving her own door closed kept whatever was happening on the other side from becoming real. As long as she kept it closed, she could pretend that this wasn't happening, that this was nothing but a nightmare, but as soon as she opened it... As soon as she opened it, she knew, reality would engulf her in a torrent of flames and her life would never again be the same.

But reality wouldn't be denied her prey. She let out a cry of fright and covered her mouth with her hands when her door suddenly flew open, apparently of its own volition.

"Adriana, we must go, quickly," her father whispered to her, apparently not surprised to find her standing motionless in the middle of her room. "They're here. They're coming for us. Where is your brother?"

Why had the warning not come? He didn't wait for her reply before returning to his own room, where he kept a suitcase packed at all times for just such an emergency.

Adriana's paralysis finally broke and she stepped into the dimly-lit hallway,

her arms still wrapped around her chest as though to shield herself from whatever was about to happen. Her parents emerged from their own room fully dressed mere moments later, and Adriana wondered if they hadn't been sleeping with their clothes on all along. Her mother stopped and stared at her in dismay.

"Adriana! Go get dressed! Now!" she snapped at her.

But they were too late. There wasn't enough time. The light of powerful headlamps filtered through the drawn curtains as the trucks pulled up in front of their apartment complex and stopped. Then came the sound of slamming doors and of boots hitting the ground, and they understood that it was all over. Their network had failed them and the warning they had been counting on to escape in time had never come.

There was a loud crash downstairs as someone broke down the entrance door. Then men, many of them, were coming up the stairs, like rolling thunder on a warm summer night, and Adriana's father grabbed her mother with one hand. With the other, he straightened his raggedy clothes and smoothed out his long, gray beard. He then went to stand in the middle of the hallway, directly in front of the door, prepared to meet the invaders with all the pride and dignity he could muster, and Adriana loved him for it. He readjusted his coat one last time, nervously, as though looking his best might bring about a different outcome.

The noise in the stairway had barely stopped that someone was banging on their door. Adriana gasped and took a step back. This really was happening.

To them. Tonight.

"Herr Zöbel, open this door immediately," someone called loudly and with authority from the other side of the door.

Her father hesitated only a moment before motioning at her mother to comply. He pulled himself up to his full height of five feet and five inches, trying to make himself appear as tall and as self-assured as possible, but to Adriana never before had he looked more scared and more helpless. Her father was a quiet, genteel, bookish owl of a man who had never known anger in his entire life, the most ill-equipped man in the world to face down the gargoyles about to invade their home.

Her father always believed that things would turn out for the best, and he was usually right. But tonight, he was about to be proved wrong. Very wrong.

"Herr Zöbel, I won't ask you again! Open this door immediately," the lead gargoyle barked.

Adriana's mother unfastened the security chain with a trembling, deliberate hand. She then wrapped her fingers around the door handle and turned it slowly. That was all the gargoyles needed.

The door flew open violently, the solid oak edge striking Adriana's mother in the forehead. The woman fell backward with a scream, her face already covered in blood, as a dozen men rushed into their small apartment. Her father raised a hand to halt them but the first man simply batted it away before grabbing the old man by his lengthy beard and pulling his head down.

"Herr Zöbel," the man began, "you and your family have been ordered

deported. You are to come with us immediately."

"Please", her father began. He was still bent forward, his two hands wrapped around that of the man who had now twisted his fingers into his beard. "Please. We have money. Take it, but leave us. Please... the money."

Adriana had retreated several steps into her room and she didn't think the men had noticed her. Not yet. From where she stood, she saw their eyes light up at the mention of money. Her father was motioning with his free hand at the suitcase that lay forgotten on the floor, next to her stunned and bloodied mother.

"The money, it's all there," her father repeated desperately, his voice shaking with fear and pain. "Take it, take it all, but leave us... I beg of you."

Adriana didn't quite understand. What was this about money? She had always assumed, perhaps incorrectly, that the suitcase contained clothes and papers and such. But money? How could her father possibly have enough to buy their freedom? They lived modestly and her last "new dress" had been a hand-me-down from her sister Tatiyana, who had married and moved away a few years earlier. Her father always pleaded poverty and the need to be ready when the day came. Could that day be today?

The scharführer who held her father by the beard looked over his shoulder and nodded at the man who stood behind him. Words weren't needed. The man walked rapidly to the suitcase and when, in her confusion, Adriana's mother tried to grab it from him, he booted her violently in the face, smashing her nose and throwing her against the wall. Adriana's gasped in fright and ran

to her mother. She dropped to her knees next to the old woman and cradled the limp body in her arms, the blood soaking her thin nightdress.

The SS staff sergeant was accompanied not by other SS men but by members of the Hlinka Guard, that militia of goons and thugs formed by the country's pro-Nazi regime. Paying the two women no mind, the guardsman dragged the suitcase to the middle of the room and put a knee down. Adriana saw him licking his lips as he placed his thumbs against the two latches and prepared to flip them. There was a small *click* when he did and he hesitated for a moment before raising the lid, knowing that all eyes were on him. Adriana knew that her future depended on what that suitcase contained.

The guardsman stared at the contents as though struck dumb with disbelief. Adriana thought she might collapse on the spot when she heard the *scharführer* curse under his breath. Now they would die. She was certain of it. If not here, tonight, with a bullet in their brain, then later, in circumstances she dared not imagine. No other outcome was possible.

The guardsman raised the suitcase with both hands and tipped out the contents. A bunch of rumpled clothes plummeted out and scattered on the floor. And through her mother's old socks and her father's stained undergarments, here and there could be seen the odd crumpled bill. A few pieces of ugly jewelry, the only ones her mother possessed, also tumbled out, thumping hard against the floor and glowing weakly in the dim light of a single light bulb. The guardsman picked up a ring Adriana's mother had inherited from her own grandmother and stared at it in disgust before handing it to the

scharführer.

The officer examined it with equal disgust before shoving it against Adriana's father face.

"With this you think to buy your freedom herr Zöbel? With this *ramsch*?" The cruel sound of the man's mirthless laughter chilled Adriana to the bone. He threw the ring aside. "I think not". Then, to his men he said: "Take them all."

Pushing the others aside and never relinquishing his painful hold on Adriana's father's beard, he mercilessly dragged the old man down the stairs. The other soldiers filed out behind him, two of them roughly ripping Adriana's half-conscious mother out of her arms and carrying her to the waiting canvas-sided trucks. Adriana instinctively stood up to hang on to her mother but the soldiers simply pushed her back.

Adriana was now alone in the empty apartment with the last two guardsmen. She expected them to grab her arms and pull her outside as well, but instead, the two men looked at one another briefly. One of them then peeked out the door rapidly and nodded to his comrade before closing it slowly.

Adriana felt her knees buckle.

She had turned 21 a few weeks earlier and she was a strikingly beautiful young woman. Her long black hair had remained full and luxurious even through these times of hardship and deprivation, and her generous figure had brought more than one hopeful suitor to the Zöbel household. All had gone home empty-handed, having been judged unworthy by her father.

Adriana took a few steps back until her shoulders came to rest against the wall. She wrapped her arms around her and only then did she notice that her blood-soaked nightdress clung revealingly to her body. The men, she knew, *had* noticed and a horrible night was just about to turn into a real nightmare.

"No, please," she said feebly as the men closed in on her.

They grabbed her by the arms and pulled her into her bedroom. She fought and she cried and she screamed, knowing those outside could hear her, but to no avail. The men were too strong and the door to their apartment remained closed.

A punch to the stomach winded her and made her want to puke, and Adriana fell silent. Her attackers let her collapse to the floor as she tried to summon one last ounce of energy to resist. One of the men knelt above her head and pulled her arms up as the other knelt between her legs, hastily unfastening his britches. Adriana wanted to kick him but it was though her whole body had gone limp. She felt as feeble as a newborn. She twisted her head from side to side, hoping to find something to bite, but the man's hands were safely out of reach.

She managed one howl of absolute despair, but then she could scream no more.

The man between her legs pushed her nightdress up before ripping off her undergarments with a practiced move. Adriana's mind went blank, flying her away from this hell she was in, and then the man was lying on top of her, lustily trying to plow her virgin garden with his swollen member.

Adriana could feel his hot, fetid breath against her neck. His fingers were digging painfully into the soft, tender flesh of her left breast. She could hear him panting and groaning but the noise came to her from a great distance, like a conversation heard from across the street. The other man was telling him to hurry up, to be done with it already before the scharführer returned.

He also said other, nastier things, but those her mind locked away and would only set free much, much later, in another time and place.

Time stood still. Her body was here, enduring the man's clumsy assault, but her mind was elsewhere. Maybe it lasted a minute, maybe it lasted an hour. To her seconds had become weeks and weeks had become seconds. She had completely detached herself from whatever was being done to her, from whatever violations were being visited upon her body. Whatever was happening to her wasn't *really* happening to her, but rather to the corporeal vessel that usually housed her essence. Her true self was somewhere else, safely far away.

But then a shaft of light tore through the stygian darkness and the curtains that had enshrouded her soul parted, if ever so slightly. Her hands were free and the man was now longer crushing her under his weight. There were new sounds in the room. Screams. Curses. Punches. Someone, she saw, was waving a gun wildly, trying to find someone, something to shoot at.

Adriana got to her feet. The guardsman who had held her wrists was the one with the gun. His back was turned to her. His accomplice was spinning around wildly, circling from left to right and from right to left, all the while wailing

like a banshee. His pants were still around his knees, which seriously limited his range of motion, and he kept tripping and falling and getting back up. He would have looked quite comical under any other circumstances. The gun was pointed in his general direction but his companion didn't dare fire.

The rapist seemed to have grown a huge hump on his back, something like that on a buffalo, and that hump was what the second guardsman was trying to aim at through his partner's wild gyrations. Except that it wasn't a hump. There was someone else in the room with them, Adriana now realized. And she had a dreadful feeling that she knew who that person was.

The guardsman tripped once again and this time, he and his hump fell out of the bedroom's darkness and into the relative light of the hallway.

"Aaron?" Adriana shouted at the top of her lungs.

Her little brother had returned just in time to see his bloodied mother being loaded onto one of the trucks and to hear his sister's screams of terror emanating from their apartment. Emerging from the night he had slipped, ghostlike, through a whole platoon of Hlinka Guards and raced upstairs at full speed, where he had found Adriana wrestling on the ground with one of the monsters in the gray uniforms.

Aaron, courageous little Aaron who had come to their family late in life, past when such things were said to be possible, had launched himself on the man's back and wrapped his hands around his face, plunging his tiny fingers into any orifice he found. Two fingers had encountered the man's eyes and twin rivulets of blood now ran from both sockets.

"Aaron! No!" she screamed again, but nobody was paying her any mind.

The guardsman, the same former convict who moments earlier had tried to run Aaron over, once again found his feet. He looked like a man trying to fend off a swarm of angry wasps as he tried, simultaneously, to remove the boy's fingers from his eyes and to fling him off his back. But Aaron was hanging on with all his might, his fear and anger endowing him with the unimaginable strength of the drowning man who leaves fingerprints in solid rock.

The guardsman reached behind him, over his head, and finally managed to grab Aaron's shoulders. He then bent forward rapidly as he yanked, catapulting the boy off his back. Aaron thumped against the floor, hard, and let out a single, deep gasp. Finally relieved, the howling man stumbled back with both palms pressed against his ruined eyes as Aaron lay, stunned, on the ground.

Adriana saw what was about to happen but she was too slow to stop it. The other guardsman was less than a meter away from her, but he might as well have been standing on the other side of the city. She saw him raise the pistol and she moved to shove him, to push his arm down, to throw herself in front of the muzzle, to cover Aaron with her own body, to do anything that she possibly could to save her little brother's life, but again, as before, her body refused to obey her. Her feet wouldn't move and her arms were frozen. All she could do was watch.

The guardsman fired a single shot. At such short range he couldn't, wouldn't, miss. And he didn't. The bullet struck Aaron square in the chest and

the little body immediately went limp. An instant later, Adriana saw – she *saw* – Aaron's soul leaving his body. The ethereal form floated in place for a moment and to Adriana it looked as though it was staring straight at her, perhaps bidding her goodbye one last time. And then it was gone, as though it had never been there at all.

That scene she would remember many times over the rest of her life but never, not for one moment, would she doubt what she had seen.

The last thing Adriana heard before passing out was the sound of the wooden staircase creaking and rattling under the assault of dozens of boots, bringing this nightmare to a close in the same manner as that in which it had begun.