THE DELIVERANCE OF SISTER CECILIA

by

SISTER CECILIA

as told to

WILLIAM BRINKLEY

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DEDICATION

To the Veronikas and Dominiks, the Sister Margitas, the Anickas and Rosas and Julkas, the Martas and Orsulas and Ludos and Valeras, the Father Janos and Filips, the Big Jo Jos . . . to all the brave people of the underground who stake their lives, and some lose them, to help the fleeing.

NOTES

For the protection of those who have not crossed the dike this book has been checked by security sources.

The letter 'c' in Czech proper names is pronounced as 'tz', and the letter 'j' as 'y'.

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Part One

I TAKE OFF MY NUN'S HABIT

I

FOUR CARS OF POLICE COME FOR ME

I FEEL someone shaking me hard enough to hurt, and I wake up in my room in the children's hospital in Bratislava and see it is a sister, all pale and quivering. "Jesus Mary Joseph!" she wails. "Sister! Oh, Sister! Four policemen are waiting for you downstairs, and four cars more of them outside! Mother Superior says to take a blanket with you because it will be cold at the police station."

For one black moment I think I am having a nightmare, but then I reach out and touch the sister, and she is flesh and blood.

"Sister," I say, "I don't intend to go to the police station."

I get up and dress fast and run up into the attic of the hospital. I look around for a place to hide, but there are only rafters and old mattresses. Frantically I climb out through a window on to a little veranda on the roof. I climb on my hands and knees up the roof and try to hide behind the chimney. I sit down behind the chimney, which was once red but is now getting black, and try to think. I am dizzy and in such terror I think I may faint and roll off the roof.

Then I look down and see on the street all the green police cars and the policemen in green uniforms all around the hospital and many passers-by stopping to see what is going on. Suddenly I think, "Holy Saviour, the police will see me in my white nursing habit against this black chimney." I get up to go back down. As I go, lurching, my foot loosens a piece of the roof-tile and it starts sliding down. The tile tumbles down the roof, down, down, towards the edge. I wait, holding my breath in horror, for it to clatter on to the street and call their eyes up to me.

The tile catches on the edge of the roof and drops into the roof gutter. I close my eyes a moment in prayer and dizziness.

I crawl back down the roof to the veranda and climb back through the window into the attic. So I go through the attic and down to my room. Five sisters are standing there now like white geese in a panic.

"Come down!" they say. "Come downstairs, Sister! The police are getting restless!"

And I think, thank the Saviour the Communist police still have enough character not to come up to a nun's room. The frenzy comes up in me, black waves of panic. Between the waves I try desperately to think of a way round the police.

Then I remember something.

I go to my suitcase and get out a dress a woman whose child was at the hospital gave me in case such a day as this should come. A dark blue dress with white polka dots and a blue kerchief for the head.

I grab out the dress and the kerchief. I run up to the attic again. I start to take off my veil.

But then my hands stop, as if held back by something outside me.

In twenty-one years, since my holy vows, I have not worn anything but a nun's habit. I think, "If I go in my habit, they will catch me. But if I go in ordinary clothes and am caught anyway, what a shameful thing for a nun to be dragged through the street in civilian dress—it is just what they would want. If I am to be caught, I want to go as a nun, proudly."

Then I stop thinking and I pray. Usually I pray through Saint Joseph, who is my best friend and, of all the saints, the one I can talk to best. But this is too big even for Saint Joseph. So I go direct and I pray, "Holy Saviour, what shall I do? Tell me."

And before I even realise what I am doing, I do it.

I lift off my veil.

I unhook my collar.

I untie my bonnet.

I untie my forehead cover.

I unhook my cloak.

I take off my belt with its rosary and cross.

I take off my dress.

I put them all under an old mattress. Then, my hands racing, I put on the blue polka-dot dress and around my head tie the blue kerchief. I run back down.

From my room I grab up two things only to take with me —a stained picture of Saint Joseph I have had since a girl; and a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help which I have had from the time I became a nun. I stick them inside the dress and go out into the corridor.

A sister is coming down the corridor carrying a small

baby. "Give me that baby," I say, thinking it will hide me better as I go now.

"Give you the baby!" she says, astonished and holding on to it. "I can't give you the baby. The doctor's waiting to examine it. I can't give it to you! How would we get the baby back? We have to get the baby back, Sister," she says, very logically.

I turn quickly from her. There is no time to argue. I open a cleaning cupboard and grab some old rags to carry so as to look like a maid from the hospital, and anyhow I am dirty from the roof. I walk downstairs. I go out of a side door and I walk through the line of police.

Now, after helping other people hide and escape across the border, I am myself the one in hiding. For the next four months I live like an animal, fleeing from hole to hole. When I made it at last across the border, on a night of darkness and fear, it was 10 January 1912. Surely it is the most terrible of all lives, hiding out in a Communist country, and possibly especially for a nun, Saint Joseph forgive my pride.

Part Two

AN UNUSUAL PREPARATION FOR THE UNDERGROUND

2

THE SOIL AND THE SAINTS

FOR an agent of the underground Holy Saviour picked a strange one in me. I was born in a village in Slovakia so small you could count the houses. I was named after Saint Cecilia, the early Christian girl whose head was cut off by the Romans. My father was a poor peasant. His family was everything to him. He loved children. He kept them coming just about every fourteen months apart on the average, in order to have new ones all the time. I arrived fourth—Maria, Irena, Edo, then Cecilia. Finally there were eleven of us, nine of them girls.

Our house was built of brown dirt and with dirt floors. The way you made the house was to mix mud and straw and pound wet into wooden forms. When it hardened you took the forms away. And you had a house. The roof was red tile baked in a nearby town. Every spring my father painted the house with whitewash. The house had four rooms and a kitchen, and the large number of children made it necessary to have beds in each room except the kitchen, where we ate. We slept on straw with sheets over it. The straw was changed once a month and smelled fresh and

nice, and the covers were filled with down from our own geese.

Everything we had was from the farm. Our clothes came from the flax which my father grew for this purpose. You put the flax in water for six weeks. Then you let it dry. Then you beat it. What you had left was linen threads. You gave these threads to the weaver who called. He made cloth from them. He took so many yards of the cloth for his pay and gave you the rest. And you had clothes. Our food was likewise direct. When we got up in the morning, we would go to the barn, then, when the milk came from our four cows, dip cups of it from the pail and drink with a hunk of heavy black bread from the big round loaves which my mother made in her brick oven, which burned wood. That was breakfast. At noon we had soup and potato pancakes. For supper more potatoes, pea beans, and sauerkraut.

I didn't know it until people told me later that I had led a hard life. I still don't know it. We were all very happy, and we never knew what it meant to need a doctor.

He was happy, the farmer in Slovakia, because of what the land meant to him. The meaning of the land to the Slovak peasant is sometimes hard for other people to understand. His land is like the blood in his body. Just like the flesh on his bones and the blood in his body, his land has been handed down to him from his family over dozens of generations and hundreds of years. My father could look at his soil and say, "My own people turned this earth five hundred years ago." It is this that makes the Slovak peasant close to the soil far beyond the living that it gives him, so that to take any of it from him is like digging out his heart and taking it.