

# *Waltz in Syncopated Time*

## *Part 6*

*Bratislava, Czechoslovakia*  
*August 17, 1987*

She stepped through the platform doors into the drab, utilitarian concrete Bratislavan station. She was holding her purse in a death grip, and realizing this, slowly forced her fingers to relax, knowing any display of nervousness would give her away.

It was quiet, she realized -- eerily so. People milled about, yet no one was speaking. Rather, they studied their feet, the ground, the signs on the walls - anything to avoid one another. She wondered again if any of them were her contact and where she was to go from here.

From nowhere, she felt a tap on her shoulder. "You need a place to stay?"

It was an old woman. She was large boned and dressed in a thin, ill-fitting cotton housedress, sturdy, thick-soled, lace-up shoes, and a garish kerchief. Amanda thought the woman looked like a caricature of a Communist babushka. Yet her eyes, set in a deeply lined face, seemed to mirror the desperation Amanda felt.

It took Amanda only moments to realize that the money she could offer as a border was probably essential to this woman's very survival. "Da," she answered in Russian, forcing herself to smile. "I do."

"Good; come with me." The old woman began to lead the way - walking with a swiftness that was in contradiction to her age.

"Wait!" Amanda ran to catch up with her. "Do you mind if we stay here a while longer; I'm supposed to meet someone."

The woman turned and looked back at her, and Amanda felt a sense of familiarity in the way she was being studied. "If this person hasn't come yet, they're probably not going to. Leave your name at the information kiosk, and we will come back tomorrow."

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"Thank you." Billy nodded at the Austrian Intelligence agent as he passed through the door.

The agent smiled in acknowledgement and then tipped his head in the direction of the young man still seated at the table, asking, "That is him?"

"Yeah," Billy affirmed. "I can't get a thing from him."

The agent sat across the table from the young man. "Gruss Gott," he addressed him in German. "Ich heisse Markus Hutmann. Wie heissen Sie?"

"Hermann," the young man offered his name in response to the question. "Hermann Matt."

"Gut, Hermann," the agent offered a lukewarm smile and then began talk him through the interview process.

Billy stood off to the side watching silently as the portrait began to emerge. The face took shape - Hermann and Markus conferring - and Billy finally could hold his tongue no longer. "I'll be damned."

"You know him?" the agent asked.

"Peter Winkel," Billy muttered. "I should've guessed." Then, turning back to the young man, he asked, "Hermann,

are you sure you don't know where to find him?"

"Hermann?" Billy repeated, watching the teen dash through the door.

The Austrian agent shook his head. "You scared him."

Billy sank heavily onto the davenport, nodding in solemn agreement. "No matter," he sighed, "I have a feeling we'll find Winkel soon enough. Or he'll find us," he amended, after a beat.

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"Come." The old woman directed Amanda up a flight of dimly lit stairs to an even dimmer corridor. "My flat is the last one." They passed door after door, and Amanda noted the chipped paint, the water-stained ceilings, and the burned out bulbs. She wrapped her arms around herself against a non-existent cold, and then let them relax at her sides.

Her hostess slid a key into the lock and swung the door open. "It must not be like the dachas you're used to," she commented, ushering her inside. "Or bourgeois American dwellings either," she added pointedly in English after Amanda was fully inside.

"Excuse me?" Amanda turned from her inspection of the apartment to her elderly companion, but the other woman merely shook her head.

"Not yet. First, some tea; then, we'll talk." She made her way to a small gas stove and put a kettle on. Amanda watched as she carefully measured out tealeaves and just as methodically poured the boiling water over them.

"Now, Mrs. King," she began after they were both seated with their steaming cups. Pausing long enough to allow Amanda to react to the usage of her name, she continued, "We are both in trouble, but I think together we can find a way out."

"You're my contact . . ." Amanda shook her head, silently berating herself for not having realized it earlier.

Sophie nodded. "Yes."

Amanda set her cup down hard, and looked at the older woman with distrust. "Who are you? What is this all about?"

With a deep sigh and a cryptic smile that signaled the start of a long story, the older woman began, "My name is Sophie Basylewicz . . ."

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He'd been wandering. Without either of them realizing it, Amanda had become his compass, and now, he didn't know where to go or what to do. He circled the city along Ringstrasse, in the faint hope that he would find something, anything that would give him a clue as to where she was. Eventually, he found himself in the spot where her body - no not her body, he mentally corrected, but that of the woman who'd died in her place - had been found.

"Where *are* you Amanda?" He asked pitching a stone into the blue-green waters of the Danube. "Where *are* you?" He stared at the ripples the stone left behind -- following each one from the center outward until it shuddered imperceptibly and vanished. The water provided no answer, however, and finally, frustrated, he turned away and began the long walk back toward the hotel.

As he walked, he absently kicked at the cobbles, this time watching the road more than the passersby. He almost missed the young man sprinting from the hotel.

"Damn!" he whispered, realizing who it was, and took up chase. Perhaps the time spent at the river had provided an answer after all.

END PART VI