

CELJE AND LIBERATED TERRITORY

1937–1945

JUST A COG IN THE MACHINE

Alma M. Karlin was highly critical of National Socialism, describing Nazis as being “in thrall to dark forces”⁵⁶⁶ and calling the Gestapo “the dregs of humanity”.⁵⁶⁷ She prayed for their destruction. It was hard for her to get used to the idea that Germans were enemies, but “one must choose to stand on one side or the other”, and she had made her choice.⁵⁶⁸ She actively opposed the rise of National Socialism. In as early as 1937 and 1938 she had given refuge in Celje to Joachim Bonsack, a German political refugee,⁵⁶⁹ and Ubald Tartaruga, a Viennese Jew.⁵⁷⁰ Furthermore, she refused to join the Kulturbund. Erika Madronič explained that “Although she considered herself a German, she had little tolerance for the pro-German faction or the members of the Kulturbund.” As a result, they soon took their revenge on her. Even before the German occupation, the Kulturbund had collected a variety of confidential information, including about people’s political orientation or about Slovenes with anti-Nazi views. The members of the Kulturbund in Celje counted Alma M. Karlin among the latter.

This explains why she was arrested and interned in the period of the first expulsions of Slovenes to Serbia, in June 1941.⁵⁷¹ She was transferred from the Capuchin convent in Celje to the *Marburg Landwehrkasarne Lager*, a collection camp set up in the Melje barracks in Maribor. She was released from there on 26 June 1941 thanks to the persistent intervention of Thea Schreiber Gammelín and some influential German friends.⁵⁷² In this way she avoided expulsion to Serbia and perhaps even deportation to Dachau.⁵⁷³ After her release from the camp, she faced a range of new problems. In the summer of 1941 the Germans confiscated her villa in Zagrad,⁵⁷⁴ although she and her friend continued to live in it. In early 1942 she received the first summons from the admissions committee of the Steirischer Heimatbund (SHB; Styrian Homeland Association) but was not admitted, although membership was a precondition for obtaining German citizenship. As a result, she merely had the status of a “protected person”, which in practice meant, as she put it, that she was under surveillance, without legal status

and still faced with the threat of expulsion.⁵⁷⁵ In connection with admission to the SHB, she was also summoned by the Gestapo, where during one interrogation she learned that she was considered “an enemy of Hitler’s regime”⁵⁷⁶

When a Gestapo interrogator by the name of Sums asked her what she believed the reason to be for the powerful and open dislike shown towards her by the people of Celje, she replied that it was because she thought with her own head.⁵⁷⁷ In autumn 1942 she unsuccessfully attempted to escape to Switzerland. In August 1944 she joined the Partisans. She believed that with their help she would be able to fly from liberated territory to Bari in Italy and from there to England, where she would be able to continue her work. She had published nothing in Germany since 1939⁵⁷⁸ and her books were banned.⁵⁷⁹ “My cupboard was filling up with books, none of which had been published. It appeared that my life’s work would go unrewarded, that all my sacrifices would bear no fruit. ... My books were to me what children are

⁵⁶⁶ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 31.

⁵⁶⁷ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 153.

⁵⁶⁸ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 109.

⁵⁶⁹ Both she and Thea Schreiber Gammelín are said to have fallen in love with Joachim Bonsack and to have quarrelled over him. She was even asked about this by the Gestapo. (Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 155)

⁵⁷⁰ This is the pseudonym of the Viennese writer and police official Edmund Otto Ehrenfreund. They already knew each other indirectly in the period in which she was travelling around the world and he wrote a report on her for the *Neues Wiener Journal*. Later they met in person in Vienna, when she was giving a talk there. He died at the concentration camp in Dachau in November 1941.

⁵⁷¹ The exact date of her arrest is not currently known.

⁵⁷² The document confirming her release from the camp at the Melje barracks in Maribor is held by H. O.

⁵⁷³ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 51.

⁵⁷⁴ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 65.

⁵⁷⁵ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 84–89.

⁵⁷⁶ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 157.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 185.

⁵⁷⁹ Karlin, *Moji zgubljeni topoli*, 101.

The life story of writer, journalist, world traveller, amateur researcher, polyglot and theosophist Alma M. Karlin (12 October 1889–14 January 1950) is astonishing and inspiring, yet also moving. She traced her own path at a very young age and then followed her dreams uncompromisingly and unpredictably. From 1919 until 1927 she travelled the world like no one before her; travelling alone, she journeyed continuously for eight years, surviving on what she was able to earn along the way. The nature of her travels places her among the greatest travellers of all time. In the early 1930s she enjoyed great success as a writer, both in Europe and beyond, but dark years were to follow.

Even as a girl in Celje she was seen as different and failed to find acceptance in her home environment. So it would be until the end of her life and even for decades after her death. A number of fabrications were circulated about her. These were either the fruit of misunderstanding, gossip, slander, envy or the interests of individuals and groups, or the result of opportunism, superficiality and lack of professionalism on the part of researchers. In some cases they were the result of fear: some of those who tried to portray her as mad and to minimise the importance of her work also kept her under surveillance and sought to eliminate her. This is no surprise, given that she publicly and decisively expressed her anti-Nazi and anti-Communist views. During the Second World War she was first watched by the Gestapo and then by the Slovene Partisans – for a while even by Herta Haas, the wife of Josip Broz Tito. She was lucky to survive that period: not only was she scheduled for deportation to the Dachau concentration camp but her name was placed on a liquidation list when she arrived in Partisan-held territory.

This first comprehensive scholarly monograph on Alma M. Karlin is the result of 23 years of research by the author. It covers a number of already known facts in greater depth and at the same time provides many new insights. Everything is based on reliable sources which are consistently cited and connected together to form a consistent whole. The most important sources of the new insights, besides the writings of Alma M. Karlin herself (and an insightful selection of quotations that tell her story in her own words), are newly discovered documents from Slovenia and Germany and first-hand accounts from individuals, particularly those who knew her personally.

Barbara Trnovec is an anthropologist and ethnologist, the curator and custodian of the Alma Karlin Collection at Celje Regional Museum, a research assistant at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts, a writer and lecturer, the author of the well-received monograph *Columbus's Daughter: The Life and Work of Alma M. Karlin* (2011), which sold out upon publication, and the creator of the major exhibition *Columbus's Daughter: Alma M. Karlin* at Cankarjev Dom, Slovenia's most important temple of culture (2017). Having spent many years researching the life and work of Alma M. Karlin, she knows her subject thoroughly and is singularly well qualified as her biographer.

€ 34.00



9 789616 411431