

In Brief | *In Brief Review*

## Four cities, three languages

On not staying put

By Kieran Williams



December 17, 2021

[Read this issue >](#)



© Ella Baron

### IN THIS REVIEW

#### MY SEVEN LIVES

Jana Juránová in conversation with Agneša Kalinová

Translated by Julia Sherwood and Peter Sherwood

380pp. Purdue University Press. \$29.99.

Jana Juránová and Agneša Kalinová

he generation born in interwar Central Europe was fated to a lifetime of flux and

**T**flight. As political regimes changed and countries appeared, vanished, and reappeared with new borders, families often had to weigh the risks of staying put. Why emigration was not always the obvious choice becomes clear from this remarkable conversation with Agneša Kalinová, who was born in Czechoslovakia in 1924 and died in Germany in 2014. During those ninety years she lived, in effect, seven lives in four cities and three languages: growing up happily in the Neolog Jewish community in Prešov (eastern Slovakia); hiding from the Holocaust in a Magdalene reformatory in Budapest; starting over in Bratislava under Stalin; thriving as a film critic, editor and translator in the years before the Prague Spring; blacklisted and arrested during the crackdown after the Soviet invasion; starting over (again) in exile in Munich; and finally, as a pensioner and widow, returning on visits to her Slovak homeland after the 1989 revolution.

Each of these seven lives could stand alone and appeal to readers interested in the history of European Judaism or of communism or the arts. But the whole, taken together, speaks to the universal human need to feel at home and safe, and describes the terrible dilemma that arises when the two are at odds. If you ever wondered why some Jews in Europe did not try to escape, or why some Holocaust survivors returned to the country that had persecuted them, or why residents of Soviet-bloc countries did not immediately defect when allowed to visit the West, Kalinová's narrative will help you understand. Some of it could be put down to illusions or misjudgement, but much of it was due to the entanglements of family and friendships and the pull of a milieu. Kalinová's decision to emigrate to West Germany in 1978 came only after it was clear that the communist state would never allow her daughter Julia to study at a university.

This book is not a conventional autobiography, but takes the form - commonly used in Central Europe - of a transcribed dialogue between the subject and a friendly interlocutor, in this case Jana Juráňová, herself an accomplished novelist and playwright. Over the course of forty-four hours in the summer of 2011, Juráňová took advantage of Kalinová's "phenomenal memory, openness and gift for storytelling" to retrieve a lost world and its large cast of characters. (The Czechoslovak secret police estimated that Kalinová and her husband had 536 acquaintances at the time of their arrest in 1972.) As impressive as Kalinová's recall of names and events is her lack of bitterness. Refusing to let herself be defined by the loss of family in the Holocaust and

of her career in middle age, she says: “I’ve always regarded life as a kind of adventure: let’s see what it throws at me and how things will pan out.”

[Browse the books from this week’s edition of the TLS at the TLS Shop](#)

---

## Keep reading

---

**In Brief** | *In Brief Review*

### Yole

A sci-fi verse novel with a traditional sensibility

By **David Wheatley**

---

**In Brief** | *In Brief Review*

### Lo-fi

The art of writing is rewriting

By **Joe Moran**

---

**In Brief** | *In Brief Review*

### Seven weeks

Collecting the daily details of life in Beirut

By **Daniel Hilton**

---

**In Brief** | *In Brief Review*

### Rubble and flutings

Applying an ancient Japanese calendar to the British climate

By **Nat Segnit**

---