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A contradictory life

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VERA GRAN: The Accused. By Agata Tuszynska. Alfred A. Knopf. 305 pages. \$28.95.

An ambitious young woman with a sultry voice and a need to be loved by the crowd, Vera Gran had the misfortune of being a Jew in wartime Poland. Protected in the early days of the Nazi occupation by fame and connections, she broke into the Warsaw ghetto to be with her mother and sister.

After the start of mass deportations to the Treblinka death camp in the summer of 1942, she fled to the “Aryan” part of the city, saving her life.

Just days after Soviet troops led the January 1945 liberation of Warsaw, a once-great city reduced to rubble under German bombardment, Gran showed up at Radio Poland to ask for work doing what she was known for: singing.

The station’s music director turned her down, saying, “They say that you were working for the Gestapo.”

Gran would spend the next 60 years defending her name in and out of various tribunals. The charges against her ranged from merely fraternizing with people known to be in the pay of the Gestapo to denouncing Jews who were hiding on the Aryan side.

Both her maligners and her defenders included eminent figures of unimpeachable character. One of the pleasures of this book is the feeling of being inside history that comes from hearing testimony from the likes of Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal and

Polish heroine Irene Sendler, who sat on opposite sides of the fence when it came to Vera Gran.

The demons drove Gran crazy. Yet, at 87, she was still a seductive woman with a powerful voice, though no longer a singer's voice, when the author of this unusual, co-joined life portrait met her in Paris 10 years ago.

It took a week before Gran would allow Agata Tuszynska "inside of her bunker."

The "dark and disturbing" apartment set the tone for the tale that followed, giving a flavor of melodrama to a story that has yet to run its course and cannot possibly have a happy ending.

Tuszynska is a respected Polish journalist and a prolific biographer, with some reputation as a poet as well. American readers may know her as the author of "Lost Landscapes: In Search of Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Jews of Poland," a brooding evocation of environments in Poland and the U.S. where the great Jewish writer spent the two halves of his life. Not incidentally, it is also a book of self-exploration and a work that has re-introduced the Nobel Prize-winning Singer to his lost compatriots in Poland.

In "Vera Gran: The Accused," Tuszynska conjures up the nightlife of Warsaw between the wars, a sidebar to Berlin or Paris, but an outpost of modernism nonetheless, with its Polish mores and personality.

With stunning economy, she conveys western luxuriance after the war and a hint that France got off lucky, in a tantalizing pair of stockings in a Parisian shop window. As a literary strategy, she takes her identification with her subject to new lengths.

"I did not write a biography," she declares.

She compares the work to a detective book, where for the purpose of discovery the investigator tries to get as close as she can to being the person she is writing about. Advocate and defendant merge into one.

“I have a feeling of being caught, just like Vera, in this web of contradictory testimony,” Tuszynska confesses. Sometimes she sounds peeved at Gran because Gran didn’t see what was happening. “Had I been in her shoes,” she offers, switching the subject to herself.

Once, she digresses to tell us about a nightmare she had after working on the book for several years. The transference of subject, from Vera Gran’s futile defense to Tuszynska’s search through the fragments of her own Polish and Jewish identities, ends with poetic insight in the author’s visit to Gran’s gravesite three weeks after the singer’s burial.

Siding uncritically with Gran’s account of who did what in the desperate ghetto leads to some unseemly mudslinging.

The villain is Wladyslaw Szpilman, the man who turned Vera Gran away at the radio station in 1945. Only a few years before, she had rescued him from the garbage heap of unemployed musicians in the ghetto and hired him to accompany her on the piano at Cafe Sztuka.

He knew the truth. He could have saved her reputation on the spot, but he didn’t. Then he went on to steal her fame when he was immortalized in Roman Polanski’s 2002 film, “The Pianist.” No one would ever know that it was Vera Gran that patrons flocked to hear, even Germans and Poles who bribed their way into the club.

Szpilman tells a different story, of course, in which Vera Gran figures no more than a manicurist, an extra, while he is the main draw. Taking up the insult, Tuszynska tosses back the suggestion that it’s Szpilman who has something to hide. What did he do to prolong his life in an atmosphere of certain death?

Gran swears she saw Szpilman in the uniform of a Jewish policeman forcing Jews onto trains bound for Treblinka. Had Gran’s accuser belonged to the dreaded police? Though she has “no proof whatsoever” that the piano player ever wore “the cap,” Tuszynska asks in the next breath, “Did this occur before the deportation of his family, or after?”

A slim reed propped up by a second accusation. Not only did Szpliman collaborate with the Germans during the war, but after the war he worked for the hated Soviets. Why else would they have allowed him to travel abroad in the late 1940s?

What is amazing about this theory is that it is a perfect copy of the charge that Vera Gran must have cooperated with the Communists to be allowed to leave the country in 1950. Tuszynska knows that in totalitarian societies, it's the accusation, not the proof, that matters. Yet, she brazenly piles on Szpilman.

In a retreat from judgment, Tuszynska announces, "We are all collaborators." Equally to blame, equally blameless, a vacuous conclusion to what's advertised as "A Meditation on the Nature of Collaboration." Anyway, it's too late to take the high road. We find ourselves sitting with "the viper-tongued Polish Jews" who chased Vera Gran from the cafes and theaters of Tel Aviv and Haifa in the 1950s and again in the '60s.

Accusations, both those made on behalf of Gran and those leveled at her by her enemies, take on a life of their own, mowing down the innocent with the guilty. Besides destroying reputations, they play into the hands of nationalist political parties across East Europe who are rewriting history and claiming that Nazism and Communism were equally evil, and that the genocide committed by the one should not be acknowledged without recalling the crimes of the other.

New regimes from Hungary to Ukraine erect statues to anti-Soviet heroes whose participation in the killing of Jews is pardoned because the Jews, who are not alive to speak for themselves, allegedly aided the Communists.

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