

THE THINGS I FOUND

LOST THINGS AND THEIR STORIES

THE RIBBON

a story by KJ WARD

FOUND IN: PRAGUE

50°04'31.5"N 14°24'33.9"E

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a photographic project by Robert Götzfried

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If only for a moment

The word was sebeúcta. In Czech it can mean self-esteem or pride. The most interesting part is that I had neither of these characteristics until the day I successfully spelled that word and won my area Spelling Bee. The year was 1984, and I was a 10-year-old primary school student in what was then Czechoslovakia. The joy I felt that day is remarkable, because the fact of the matter is that I should never have even been born. In the summer of 1973, my mother, like many other Roma women, was subjected to a forced sterilization attempt. No doctor of hers had ever gotten anything right, so perhaps it is no wonder that the sterilization was also botched. She suffered a terrible infection and endured much pain as a result of the procedure, but in the autumn of the following year she gave birth to me. So, who asks for joy in his life when he is lucky even to have breath in his body?

Most of the other Roma kids in our town – whether their families lived there for two months or two years – attended one of the country’s “practical” schools. Our teachers liked to talk about the benefits of the hands-on education our school provided, but I knew that Roma kids filled these schools because Czech people didn’t think we were intellectually suited for an academic education and most of our parents weren’t in a position to know any better. The Czech kids in my neighborhood confirmed this idea with regularity. Well, not my neighborhood exactly. I had to walk through a mostly Czech neighborhood to get to my school. And, while most of the Czech kids went to “regular” schools, our paths still crossed.

It stung at first, but at some point I just stopped feeling altogether. From news reports on the myriad ways that Roma families were a “drain on society” to the countless times “stupid gypsy” had so easily rolled off of other kids’ tongues – the arrows began falling on unfeeling skin. Numbness had become my general condition.

But something changed the day my teacher looked at me and said, “You have great promise. I see it in you, but you’ll have to prove it to yourself. Why don’t you compete in the Spelling Bee?” Her suggestion left me equally incredulous and excited. Me? A Roma kid from Zábřeh competing in a regional Spelling Bee? I mean, we played against Czech kids in football matches from time to time (and always won) but a single Roma kid going head-to-head with Czech kids in a battle of the brains?

I suspect that my father’s stated objection to my participation – “a stupid idea and a waste of time” – was a cover for his desire to shield me from unnecessary hurt. He had once been told that he’d be better off putting his interest in engineering to work in masonry, though he desperately wanted to attend university and study architecture. He begrudgingly but dutifully carried a lunch pail and a hard hat to some construction site in some town nearly every day of his adult life until his death last year.

So, in the dead of night, after my parents had gone to sleep, I studied the spellings, cognates, and etymologies of the trickiest words in the Czech dictionary until I found myself on stage with 49 other students from all across Central Bohemia. Then it was 30. Then it was 10. Then 3. Then me. I had won.

The blue and yellow ribbon pinned to my chest was the most beautiful thing I had ever owned. For the first time I allowed my young self to begin imagining what else might be possible for me. I imagined the joy on my parents' faces as I ran home to surprise them with the news. But, all imagining, all anticipation, and all pride were quickly snuffed out when a couple of kids – two of the usual suspects – tripped me while in full stride. I hit the ground hard and tore a hole in my trousers. The kids just laughed, saying that I was getting too big for them anyway because the only thing worse than a Roma is a Roma who doesn't know his place. That's when they snatched my beautiful blue and yellow ribbon from my chest and ran off.

In an instant, life went back to the way life had been. I never saw my ribbon again, and today, on the eve of my 40th birthday, I have yet to feel such joy and pride in any accomplishment, and I don't expect that I ever will.