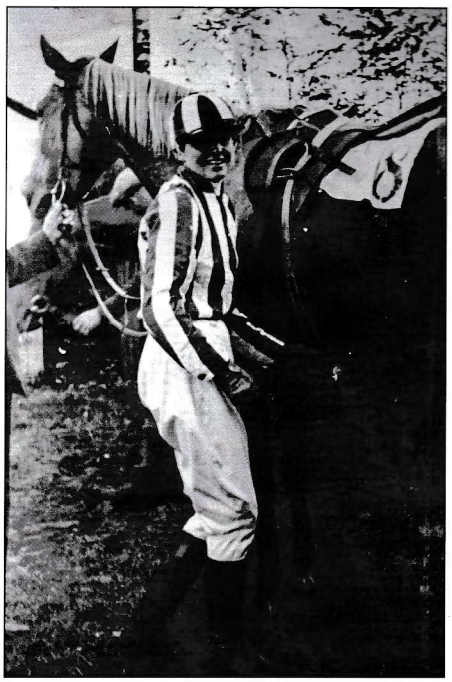
Lata Brandisová
the forgotten racing hero

On the eve of World War II, the aristocratic jockey Lata Brandisová was celebrated across Europe. While Czechs and Slovaks have mostly forgotten her Richard Askwith celebrates the lost life of the first and only woman to win the Velká pardubická steeplechase

The short-lived nation of Czechoslovakia was blessed with many dazzling sporting champions. Its rulers were cursed by a compulsion to disown them. Emil Zátopek, Věra Čáslavská, Olga Fikotová-Connolly, Martina Navrátilová, the near-invincible national men's ice-hockey team of 1947-1949: all conquered and mesmerised their chosen worlds, only to be denounced as traitors or enemies of the people. Some were punished; all were shunned. But none fell so far or for so long as Lata Brandisová, the steeplechase jockey.

Lata who? If you're anything like most of the Czechs, Slovaks or Slavophile Britons to whom I've mentioned her name in recent years, you'll never have heard of her. In the half-century following her years of glory, Lata Brandisová's achievements were written out of history: first by the Nazis and then by the Communists. On the eve of World War II, however, she was a figurehead for her nation and her gender. Her subsequent obscurity has been a great injustice.

The fifth child of a family of impoverished, German-speaking aristocrats, Lata grew up in a small stately home in Řitka, near Prague, in the twilight years of the Habsburg empire. Her assumed destiny was to be a nobleman's wife. World War I, and the subsequent creation of the First Republic, put paid to that. The Brandis family lost their title, their son and heir, and much of their property. Lata and five sisters remained at home. But Lata had never shown much interest in finding a husband. She preferred the company of horses.



Lata Brandisová in 1933

Her rapport with the species was uncanny. Even the most troublesome beasts succumbed to her gentle charms. Her secret, she said, was that she rode "with peace and love", aiming to make each horse her willing friend rather than a mere obedient servant. In an age when horses still played an important role in most aspects of daily rural life, this was a valuable skill. But Lata was also tough, agile, brave and competitive. In other words, she had all it took to be a superb jockey. Her gender, however, made this impossible. Women were not allowed to ride in official races. One leading trainer, Karel Šmejda, let her exercise his horses for him at Velká Chuchle. On race-days, however, she could only watch.

But times were changing. Tomáš Masaryk abhorred discrimination against women; the Czechoslovak constitution forbade it. Bias and exclusion continued, but they were at least being challenged. Strong-willed women – Eliška Junková, Hana Podolská, Olga Scheinpflugová, Milada Petříková-Pavlíková, Františka Plamínková – were asserting their right to make full use of their talents in their chosen fields. Lata wanted to do the same in horse-racing.

Eventually, in 1927, her influential cousin, Zdenko Radslav Kinský, helped her to secure a one-year amateur jockey's licence. That May she rode in a flat race at Velká Chuchle, the first officially sanctioned race for female jockeys. But that was not the main goal. Kinský wanted Lata to help him achieve a grander ambition: winning the Velká pardubická.

I presume that readers need no introduction to Europe's toughest and most notoriously dangerous steeplechase, held in Pardubice every October, with its vast, life-threatening jumps and its stamina-sapping stretches of ploughed field. Perhaps they can also imagine the scandal that Lata's proposed participation in such an extreme event must have caused, at a time when women were officially considered too fragile to compete even in most Olympic track-and-field disciplines.

The Czechoslovak cavalry officers who dominated the Velká pardubická at the time protested furiously. Riding against a woman would be an intolerable stain on their honour, they claimed. They were still protesting on the day of the race. Lata, for whom Kinský had managed to secure written backing from the English Jockey Club, faced down the barrage of hostility. She not only started the race but finished it, in fifth place. She fell five times while doing so, at some of Pardubice's most brutal jumps (including the notorious Taxis ditch), but remounted each time. This said something about her inexperience but more about her toughness. The public warmed to her.

The cavalry officers took longer to win round. Some seem to have shunned her for years, and there was talk of men standing up

Lata Brandisová with her mother and siblings ***Photo: Pospisil Archive***

and leaving rooms the moment she entered them. But Lata kept returning to Pardubice, always riding one of her cousin's home-bred Kinský horses. Each year, she did slightly better. She came fourth, third, second. By the mid-1930s, she was Czechoslovakia's most accomplished steeplechase jockey (following the death of Rudolf Popler in 1932) and was arguably its best-known sportswoman. Even the cavalry officers recognised her as a national treasure, while race-goers celebrated her as "naše slečna" (roughly: "our damsel").

The Velká pardubická had changed by then. So had Czechoslovakia. Hitler's shadow loomed, and the Sudetenland's discontents multiplied in the darkness. Hostility between Germans and Czechs threatened to tear Masaryk's young democracy apart. The propaganda war between Nazis and democrats escalated, grew dirtier and, increasingly, made use of sport. The Berlin Olympics of 1936 were the most grotesque example of Hitler's use of sporting competition for political purposes. But Pardubice was another important arena in which the Third Reich promoted the myth of the invincible Aryan warrior ("as agile as a greyhound, as tough as leather and as hard as Krupp steel," in Hitler's words).

The German jockeys who competed in increasing numbers in Pardubice from 1928 onwards were not just German: they were,

with few exceptions, enthusiastic and active Nazis. From 1934 onwards all Germans who participated in equestrian sports had to belong to one of two paramilitary organisations: either the SA (the 'brown-shirts') or the Equestrian SS (overseen by Hermann Fegelein, mastermind of the equestrian events at the Berlin Olympics). But some, such as Hans Schmidt (winner of the 1928 Velká pardubická) and Heinrich Wiese (winner in 1934) had joined the cause much earlier than that.

The joy of coming to Pardubice to crush the "subhuman Slavs" (Hitler's words again) was that, in propaganda terms, it worked. Between 1928 and 1936, seven out of nine Velká pardubickás were won by German or Austrian-owned horses. For Czechoslovaks, the annual humiliation exacerbated a wider loss of national self-confidence. Then came October 1937.

Tomás Masaryk had died the previous month. His nation was still in shock. Two million mourners had brought Prague to a standstill for his funeral on September 21 – "a great demonstration of Czechoslovak unity at a moment when the public mind feels that this should be demonstrated", according to the London *Times*. "That was not a crowd," declared Přítomnost. "That was a nation."

Now, less than three weeks later, his bereaved nation stood poised between defiance and despair, and the big national sporting event of the year was set to be a confrontation between democratic Czechoslovakia and the Third Reich that threatened it. Never has a horse-race been so charged with political and emotional significance.

The Germans had sent their strongest ever raiding party. Among the visiting riders were five SS or SA officers – including the aforementioned Schmidt and Wiese (respectively SS-Scharführer and SA-Oberführer); and SS-Unterstürmfuhrer Oscar Lengnik, winner in 1935 and 1936. The locals included a 'vociferous' Prague-based supporter of Konrad Henlein's Sudeten German party, champion steeplechase jockey Willibald Schlagbaum. All these were reasonably felt to be riding for the Third Reich.

Czechoslovakia had little to offer by way of resistance: the local cavalry officers were mostly riding no-hopers. But there was one other competitor: a 42-year-old ex-countess, with silver hair, riding a little golden Kinský mare called Norma.

Lata Brandisová in 1947

Photo: Východočeské muzeum

Statesmen, socialites and visiting dignitaries were among the unprecedented crowd that filled Pardubice racecourse to bursting point. The rest of the country listened on the radio. Norma was a 12-1 outsider, but she and Lata were carrying the hopes of the nation.

The race was as brutal as ever: only ten of the 15 runners finished. Against all the odds, Lata and Norma won. The rejoicing crowds took hours to disperse, and there were tempestuous celebrations across the country.

Lata Brandisová at Pardubice

Photo: Pospisil Archive

In Berlin, the reaction was darker. Anti-Czech rhetoric in the Reichstag in the week following the race was described by one observer as "the most violent used by Germany against another country since 1918". Within a fortnight Hitler was stepping up his plans for conquest.

The 1937 Grand Pardubice was the last for nearly a decade. The 1938 race was called off following the Munich agreement. Six months later, Hitler was in Prague.

But Lata Brandisová's fearless spirit was unquenched. She was implicated (obscurely) in the public declarations of Czech nationality made in 1938 and 1939 by a small, defiant sub-section of the nobility. When the Nazis took their revenge by seizing the ringleaders' property, Lata's was one of the first eight estates to be taken into administration.

Lata and her sisters stopped speaking German – their first language – and Lata stayed away from horse-races – her first love – for the duration of the occupation. She kept local spirits up with small disobediences, took repeated risks helping the resistance, and tirelessly nursed the wounded during the liberation of Prague.

She did not, however, live happily ever after. She regained the family home in May 1945 and returned to racing – but not, in either case, for long. In 1948, the Communists took power. In 1949 a bad fall in Pardubice left Lata in a coma for a week. She never fully recovered from her injuries.

The state by then considered her a class enemy – most of her Kinský relatives had defected (one of them with her help). From 1950 onwards, she and her sisters were gradually forced from their property, which became a state farm. The final eviction took place in 1953. Most of the family's belongings were looted, and for the next 27 years Lata and her sisters lived in great poverty, in a tiny, isolated cottage in the woods nearby, without electricity or running water. In late 1980, with all but one of her sisters dead, Lata was able to move to Austria, where a nephew cared for her for the last months of her life. Her death, in 1981, was barely reported. By 1989 she was simply too forgotten for anyone to think of rehabilitating her reputation.

Yet her significance as a pioneer of fair opportunities for women in sport remains huge; and the Velká pardubická, at least, still shows signs of her influence. Six other women have now ridden in the race. Some readers may have heard of Eva Palyzová (who competed seven times between 1959 and 1972), or, more recently, of Martina Růžičková-Jelínková (who did so five times between 1991 and 2014). They may have missed the fact that Charlotte Brew, the Englishwoman who in 1977 became the first woman to ride in the Grand National, rode in the Velká pardubická later that year. Yet Brew's experience is revealing.

When she rode at Aintree she provoked a storm of hostility: the scandal made front-page headlines in the national press. In Pardubice, she was warmly welcomed, but her participation barely raised eyebrows. No one questioned the idea that a woman – even an Englishwoman – could compete with men on equal terms.

For that alone, Lata deserves to be remembered. She significantly advanced the cause of equal opportunities in sport; and, by humbling the supposed supermen of the Third Reich, made a mockery of the idea that, when it comes to resilience and fighting spirit, a woman is no match for a man. Nor should we underestimate the scale of her sporting achievement, as the first and only woman to win the Velká pardubická.

Yet perhaps the saddest thing is that her political significance has been forgotten. In October 1937, in one of Czechoslovakia's darkest hours, Lata Brandisová was brave enough to be the hero her nation yearned for, embodying its defiance and, for a while, restoring its morale. She deserves to be honoured as an iconic figure in her nation's history. Instead, her name has slipped from memory.

Some Czechs may justifiably wonder why an Englishman considers himself qualified to write her first biography. I can only reply that I wonder why no Czech biographer has seen fit to attempt the task before me.

■ **Richard Askwith's biography of Lata Brandisová, *Unbreakable: The Woman Who Defied the Nazis in the World's Most Dangerous Horserace*, will be published by Yellow Jersey on March 7, 2019.**