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The True Story  
of a Jewish Boy  
and His Mother in  
Mussolini’s Italy

*Exclusive  
e-book content:*  
**ALL-NEW  
EPILOGUE**

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*al Confino*

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**A CHILD**  
***AL CONFINO***

**Eric Lamet**

FOREWORD BY RISA SODI, PHD

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AVON, MASSACHUSETTS

# Author's Note

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These memoirs were inspired by a compulsion to give my children a glimpse of how their father grew up in what were arduous times, especially for European Jews. They were also written before the memory fades and the experiences endured by me and many others like me are forever lost to future generations. I have not attempted to gain the reader's sympathy, for none is deserved. I did, however, make a diligent attempt to depict, as objectively as I could, the lifestyle we experienced in Italy during the Fascist regime.

I am happy that not all that is written addresses itself to the ugliness of mankind. In the midst of all the horror of that period, there were glimmers of human goodness. Some even touched me personally.

I do not call myself a “survivor,” for this term rightly belongs to those brave and remarkable individuals who endured the brutalities of the German death camps. I do consider myself a remnant of what once had been the large, culturally rich Jewish community of Europe.

My odyssey lasted sixty-seven months and represents a period in my life that I would not want to relive for all the fortunes in the world. Yet, sixty years later, I very much cherish the memories.

All the individuals portrayed herein are real persons and only in a few instances, mostly because of memory lapses, have their names been changed or omitted.

With gratitude so great that words fail to adequately express it, I wish to thank the following:

My loving agent, Sally Wecksler, whose belief in me and my work made this book a reality. Sadly fate deprived her of rejoicing in this success and seeing that her trust was justly placed;

My editor, Peter Schults, for his indefatigable and enthusiastic attention to this work and his constant encouragement;

My dear wife, Cookie, for graciously enduring the countless times I compelled her to reread the same chapters or paragraphs and for the faith she continues to have in me.



Dedicated to Lotte and Pietro Russo, for all they still mean to me.

*In memory of the millions of innocent human beings who suffered and who perished at the hands of the  
Nazi monsters.*

# About the Author

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Eric Lamet was born Erich Lifschütz on May 27, 1930, into an upper-middle-class Jewish family. Both of his Polish-born parents moved to Vienna before the first Great War.

On March 18, 1938, five days after the Anschluss, when German troops marched into Vienna, Lamet's family fled to Italy, where he spent most of the next twelve years. When World War II ended, Lamet settled in Naples with his family. He finished high school in that city and later enrolled in the Department of Engineering at the University of Naples.

In 1950, the family moved to the United States, where Lamet continued his engineering studies at the Drexel Institute of Technology in Philadelphia near his family's home. Deciding that business was more in keeping with his personality, he embarked on a business career. Over the years he became involved in a variety of enterprises and retired as a CEO in 1992.

Fluent in German, Italian, English, Spanish, and Yiddish, Lamet served as an interpreter for the U.S. State Department and taught Italian for several years.

Lamet has three children, two stepchildren, and seven grand-daughters. He lives with his wife in Tamarac, Florida.

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## Foreword by Professor Risa Sodi

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If you travel today to the southern Italian village of Ospedaletto d'Alpinolo in the Apennine Alps east of Naples, you will find a village perched 2,200 feet above sea level and ranging over 1,400 acres, half of them rocky cliffs. Its 1,639 residents make a living today as they have for centuries: from the hazelnut and chestnut forests surrounding the town. Its 643 dwellings are interspersed with pizzerias, restaurants, hotels, and shops that provide the amenities of modern life — including Internet access, as evidenced by the town's website.

Sixty-five years ago, however, when young Eric Lamet and his mother, Carlotta Szyfra Brandwein, were sent there to begin four years of compulsory internal exile, life in Ospedaletto was radically different. The terrain and the surrounding forests were essentially the same, only the population, with 1,800 inhabitants, was slightly larger than it is now. In 1940, the Fascist system of *il confino* (from the Italian verb *confinare*, meaning “to confine, to relegate”) had forcibly brought to the village scores of foreigners, political activists, Jews, and sundry other potential enemies of the state.

*Il confino* was a system of enforced internal exile devised by Mussolini quite early in his regime in order to marginalize those who could potentially cause it harm. Conceived as a measure halfway between a warning and incarceration, *il confino* was a police procedure that required no actual trial but, rather mere denunciation by local authorities. In the years preceding 1938, the *confinati* were usually vocal political opponents of fascism; indeed, the most prominent anti-Fascist thinkers of the day ended up in internal exile, mainly on Italy's countless small islands. There, they were divorced from political events, deprived of the means to communicate with the mainland and settled among generally indifferent or non-politicized local populations. The Communist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, the Socialist leader Pietro Nenni, and the liberal thinkers Giovanni Amendola and Piero Gobetti all were sent into internal (island) exile before 1938.

The mechanism of *il confino* was quite simple: Those affected were required to remain within a certain area (usually within the town limits) and to sign in daily at the local police station. They were responsible for finding their own housing and providing their own means of support aside from the stipend provided from the Fascist government. Correspondence was censored, and in many locales gatherings of *confinati* were banned. In 1938, in an effort to appease Hitler and keep pace with his German ally, Mussolini promulgated a series of “racial laws” applied specifically to Italy's Jewish population.

The native-born Italian Jews, spread among several dozen central and northern Italian communities, worshiped in either the Italian or the Sephardic rite. They fell mostly into the middle class (though there were notable wealthy families, such as the Olivettis of Ivrea, as well as pockets of desperate

poverty, especially in and around Rome) and were extraordinarily assimilated into Italian political, cultural, and everyday life. The Fascist racial laws directed at them were at once overarching and picayune, vexatious, and devastating. As of autumn 1938, for example, Jews were forbidden from marrying Aryans (non-Jewish Italians), from holding any sort of state job, serving in the military, or employing an Aryan domestic, or even from owning land over a certain value or a factory with more than a certain number of workers. Jews could not list obituaries in their local newspapers or own a radio. Jewish students were banned from public schools, including the universities and Jewish teachers, attorneys, doctors, and others were banned from their professions. Exemptions were allowed within certain limits; nonetheless, the impact on the Italian Jews — both psychological and material — was crushing.

Foreign Jews suffered to an even greater extent after Italy entered World War II in June 1940. A previous 1938 law had required them to leave the country, although few had obeyed; those remaining were subject to internment camps or *il confino*. Thus, in 1940, Eric and his mother, like thousands of Jews who had left Germany, Poland, Hungary, Austria, and Romania for the relative safety of Italy, were caught up in the Fascist regime's new policies. Thus far, Lamet and his mother's peregrinations — from Vienna to Milan, to Paris, to Nice, and to San Remo — had kept them one step ahead of the authorities. But in June 1940, all that ended with Italy's entry into World War II and their relegation “confinement” in Ospedaletto.

The crux of *A Child al Confino* centers on young Lamet's and his mother's struggles in backward Ospedaletto. Urban sophisticates, they faced often-arduous adjustments to harsh new climes, new customs and cultures, and new language systems — the often impenetrable dialects of the Italian mountain communities. Once residents and part owners of a premier Viennese hotel, they were now straining to find suitable housing, to scrounge for food and to procure some sort of education for twelve-year-old Eric ... all futile searches, as it turned out. Lamet echoes the observations of other internees, notably Carlo Levi and Natalia Ginzburg, both Italian-Jewish authors and former *confinati*. Lamet's memoir, like Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* and Ginzburg's *It's Hard to Talk about Yourself*, notes that relegation to the primitive mountain *confino* villages was akin to stepping back in time.

Just as mother and son struggled, however, they also were favored with new friendships and new ties. Lamet's portrayal of the ragtag group of Ospedaletto *confinati* characters at times amusing, endearing, and maddening. It also introduces Pietro Russo, a fellow exile who had such a profound impact on Lamet's life that he dedicated this memoir to him.

In the fall of 1943, General Mark W. Clark and his Allied troops began Operation Avalanche, the long slog up the Salerno coast that eventually liberated southern Italy. Eric and his mother rejoiced at their liberation by American soldiers that October. At the time, they could not have known that in a strange twist of fate *il confino* had saved their lives, for had they been interned in northern Italy they would have come under the jurisdiction of Nazi troops and most likely would have found themselves

among the 7,000 Italian and foreign Jews who were deported to Auschwitz and other Nazi *lagers*. Of those deported, only three hundred Italian Jews and five hundred foreign Jews survived.

Eric remained in Italy until 1950 when he, his mother, and her second husband — that same Pietro Russo — settled in the United States. His memoir traces a little-told story: of child refugees in Italy, of foreign Jews in Italy during World War II, of the hardships imposed by the *confino* system, of the southern Italian mountain villages, and of the mutual respect that often developed not only among *confinati* but also between unsophisticated peasants and urban intellectuals both struggling under adversity.

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## Escape from Vienna

Stunned, peeking from behind the hallway wall for the longest moment, I watched my father rapidly pacing the four corners of the living room floor. I could tell he was very tense. Never changing his fast rhythm, he was mumbling in such a low tone I couldn't tell whether he was speaking German or his native Polish.

We had eaten our breakfast hours before, yet my mother was still in her silk robe. *Mutti's* hair lacked its usual neatness and her face was drawn and without makeup. She sat stiffly against the wall on one of the dining room chairs. While her eyes followed my father's every step, I could tell that her mind was far away, immersed in other thoughts. Never, until that awful morning, had there been such an upheaval in my well-ordered, carefree life of nearly eight years. *What did I do?* was the only thought running through my mind. *Did my teacher send home a bad report?* I was certain they were discussing what punishment I deserved, something they had never done before.

“What happened?” I asked meekly voicing words that had crossed my mind moments before, instantly sorry to have said anything and hoping not to have been heard.

Neither of my parents answered. Often I had felt bothered when my parents failed to notice my presence but, this time I was glad they hadn't. In my frightened state, I felt relieved not to have to cope with their answers.

That morning, for the first time, *Mutti* had not helped me to get dressed. She had come to my room at the usual hour and sat on the bed. “You're not going to school today.”

“Why not?”

“Please, don't ask questions.”

Now, my mother's nervousness of earlier that morning was more intense. I watched as her foot delicately tapped the parquet floor, her hands tightly clenched her knees, showing the white outline of her fair skin.

Millie, our housekeeper as well as my governess, walked into the dining room to set the table for the midday meal and my father stopped pacing. Millie always moved about the house with a bounce to her step, humming some Austrian folk tune; now she worked in silence. The sight resembled a movie scene in slow motion: *Mutti* sitting motionless and staring into space, Papa awkwardly standing still on the spot where he last had placed his foot, and Millie moving about as if unaware of our presence.

Though I was not quite eight, I had already learned to stay out of my parents' way when something unusual was going on. What was happening was more than unusual; it was downright scary. Perhaps it was best to make myself invisible. Creeping backward toward my bedroom all the while trying to



guess what could possibly have happened to cause such gloom, a bizarre thought crossed my mind: I wished I could have been in school with the teacher I detested, doing assignments I liked even less.

From my doorway I watched as Millie left the dining room and Papa resumed his pacing. I quickly returned to my room and, cuddling my teddy bear, I lay on my bed and cried quietly.

Soon after, I heard my parents' loud exchange. Driven more by curiosity than fear, I walked back to the living room. They were shouting in Polish, a language I could understand when spoken slowly and calmly. And as they did neither, I understood nothing. But I could tell they were not fighting with one another, as they had done many times before and that was a relief for me.

"I'm glad you're here," *Mutti* said. "I was just going to call you. Come *Schatzele*. Lunch is ready." Her tone had none of the pleasantness I so loved.

As though nothing had happened to give rise to the strange behavior I had witnessed all morning, we sat at the table to eat the main meal of the day.

"Millie," *Mutti* called. "You may start serving."

Sullen, Millie entered, placed a silver-plated soup tureen on the table, then turned on her heels and left. Never had she acted like that before. My ever-smiling Millie had always served each of us. No one ever had to ask her. She had loved doing it. Papa was about to say something but, my mother looked at him and with one finger across her lips, motioned for him to be silent. Then she shrugged her shoulders and did the serving herself.

We sat in silence. I waited for the storm that was certain to come.

"Why aren't you eating?" *Mutti* asked.

Her words caught me off guard. Trembling, I started to cry. "I'm scared, *Mutti*. I don't know what's happening."

She placed her arms around me, pulled me close, and stroked my hair. "Erich, one day you'll understand." As she spoke, I saw tears well in her eyes. "Yesterday German soldiers invaded Vienna. It was March 14, 1938.

My mother was right. I did not know what it all meant. Still I felt threatened. What did it mean that German soldiers invaded Vienna? Who were these German soldiers? I wanted to ask these questions and more but, somehow did not dare.

We had just finished lunch when *Mutti* suggested I take my daily rest. "Go, *Erichl!*"

I usually loved it when she used the pet name *Erichl*, but this time it did not seem to matter much.

A blaring radio jolted me out of my nap. The noise had to be coming from neighbors across the courtyard. No one in our home would turn on the radio right after lunch when we were taking our afternoon naps. Nor would my parents, out of concern for the other tenants, allow the volume to be so loud. Strange music screeched from the speaker, mixed with a man's voice more loud than

understandable. Crowds screamed in the background. I got up to see where the sound was coming from.

In her colorful Austrian *dirndl*, the costume she wore only for special occasions, Millie sat transfixed in front of our radio. She had pulled a dining room chair into the antechamber, next to the small table on which she had placed the much-too-large receiver. It looked dangerously close to the edge and almost ready to fall. And that chair? No one had ever moved those chairs out of the dining room. Millie knew it wasn't allowed. What was going on? She seemed hypnotized and unaware of my presence.

I walked up to her and placed two fingers on the volume knob. Without a glance, Millie grabbed them and pushed them away with such force as to crack the small bones and make my hand go numb. I was in shock. Was this the gentle and loving Millie in whose bed I cuddled many mornings before going off to school, preferring hers to my mother's? I wanted to cry out but, her meanness made me run away and look for safety inside my room, where I buried my face in the soft down pillow.

That evening the situation grew still more troubling. Millie was nowhere to be seen and my mother was left to bring dinner to the table herself. My parents hardly spoke and I, grasped by the fear of the unknown, did not dare utter a sound.

After dinner, *Mutti* moved our dishes to one corner and pulled her chair next to mine. She cleared her throat and I, though looking at my father, spoke to me. "Listen to me carefully, Erich. I don't want you to go out of the house. I don't want you to speak to Millie or anyone in the building. I don't want you to listen to the radio, and you will not be going to school for the next few days." From her tone and my father's nodding approval, I knew none of this was open for discussion.



Eric's father, Markus Lifschütz, in 1928.

Between 1930, the year I was born, and 1938, my family had enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. Papa with his younger brother Oswald — my Uncle Osi — managed the Hotel Continental. It must have been a first-class hotel since many rich and elegant foreigners came to stay. I thought the hotel was ours but, later learned it was owned by my granduncle Maximilian, who had made a small fortune when oil was discovered on his land in the Ukraine. From my parents I learned that Uncle Max, who was my grandpa's brother, was a generous man who shared his good fortune with members of his family. With the proceeds of the sale of his oil fields, he had purchased real estate in several European countries then let a number of his relatives benefit from some of the revenues these investments generated.

After my parents married and for the first four years of my life, we lived at the hotel, where my mother enjoyed many comforts: built-in babysitters, laundry service, daily maid help, and two restaurants with room service. Well-to-do families without children found it convenient to live in a hotel in those days. The Continental had suites with kitchenettes and living rooms and it offered services and comforts not found in private homes. A number of my parents' friends had taken up residence at the hotel.

Cooking and baking were my mother's loves, and since living in the hotel made it difficult to satisfy her longing for those passions, we moved to our own apartment in 1934. I had liked living in the hotel. It was the only home I had known. My friends were all there: the bell captain, the concierge, the waiters, the chambermaids, and some of the regular guests. I wasn't anxious to change. So I asked *Mutti* why we had to move. “Growing up in a hotel is not good for a child,” was her answer.

We stayed in our first apartment for the year I attended kindergarten, but as soon as I was ready to start first grade, we moved again, this time to larger quarters on the Tabor Strasse. The hotel was on the same street, right on the corner intersecting the Prater Strasse, no more than 200 yards away. For Papa this was very convenient. He could walk to work, come home for lunch, take a short nap and be back at the hotel for the remainder of the day.

Mother's lifestyle was typically Viennese. In the afternoon, almost ritually, she met her friends at the Kaffee Fetzter where, after an exchange of gossip, she played bridge until evening. After dinner at home, many of these same women met again, this time accompanied by their husbands, to socialize in one of the many coffeehouses for which Vienna was famous.



Eric's mother, Carlotte Szyra Brandwein, in 1928.

Our first apartment was across the narrow street from the Kaffee Fetzter. Often I walked over to see *Mutti*, not out of any interest in her friends or the coffeehouse, but because I liked the candies one of her lady friends frequently brought with her. Once that friend sent me to the candy store around the corner.

“Please get one-quarter pound of chocolate-covered orange peels,” she said.

Convinced the woman intended the candies for me, I asked the clerk to let me taste one before placing the order. I cringed. “Too bitter,” I said.

“May I get you something else?” the clerk asked.

“Yes, I'll have those,” I pointed at the pralines.

When I returned with the wrong candies, the ladies looked amused and I did not get scolded. Not



even *Mutti* was annoyed. The lady, who had given me the money, took her change. “It is perfectly all right,” she said. “You may keep the candies for yourself.”



Eric at three weeks, June 1930.



Eric at age one with his mother in Semmering, 1931.

Mine was a happy, orderly life that revolved around my Millie, two-month-long Alpine summer vacations on the Semmering with Mother until I was about four, yearly visits with my grandparents in Poland, and weekly afternoons with *Omama*, my maternal grandmother. I also had many friends near

my own age; we played in our courtyard and shared mutual birthdays. Oh, how I loved the chocolate pudding with sliced bananas, a favorite at any birthday party. Then there were our relatives, who made a great fuss over me, for I was the only child in the family's Viennese contingent.

During the four days following March 14, our lives changed dramatically. I stayed home with *Mutti* while Papa came and went more often than usual. My parents endured Millie's many disrespectful actions. Because of the disturbances on the streets, no one shopped for groceries that Monday and, since we had no means to keep food cold, by Tuesday we had little in the house to prepare for a meal.

"Millie, would you go to do the shopping?" *Mutti* asked.

Millie's tone was insolent. "I'm busy right now. I'll do it when I have time."

I couldn't believe my ears. What had happened to her respectful "Of course, madam, right away"? At twenty-two she had lost all her good manners. Mother would never have tolerated that tone from me.

The radio, the volume blatantly turned high to show Millie's newly asserted independence, blared throughout the apartment. In the streets people were chanting and marching, but I did not know what was happening because my ever-watchful mother made sure I did not look out the window.

Millie was allowed to take off more time than ever before. Well, not really allowed. She didn't ask, merely announced, "I will be going out for the day."

"When will you be back?" *Mutti* asked.

"Whenever I get back."

Mother never asked that question again.

Millie's absence gave my parents the freedom to talk openly. They would ask me to leave the room but even though I did, I could not help but overhear when their voices rose. In their eyes I knew I was not old enough to be trusted with the gravity of our situation, yet I was old enough to sense it was really serious.

"They're rounding up Jews and taking them into cellars," my father said. "I don't know what they are doing, no one knows, but I hear horrible stories. Someone said they have stopped Jewish women on the streets and forced them to use their fur coats to wash the side-walks." When I heard that, I thought of my *Mutti* and could not imagine her complying with such an order.

"We must leave!" *Mutti* said. She was a woman of action, always in charge of our family. "With our Polish passports, we'll be able to leave Austria without any trouble."

In spite of living in Vienna for more than twenty years, my parents had never given up their Polish citizenship.

*We must leave?* I repeated to myself. What did that mean and where would we be going? I spent most of the next four days in my bed whispering to my teddy bear and trying to read. I felt like a prisoner waiting for his sentence. The fear of the first day mounted with every passing hour.

On March 18, five days after the German troops had marched into Vienna, *Mutti* came to my room

to tell me we were going to Poland. Her face was pale, her eyes swollen and red.

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“Do we have to?” I asked.

With a forefinger placed on her lips, she signaled for me to remain silent. “*Opapa* is ill and has asked us to come visit him.” Her voice was unnaturally loud. I couldn't understand why she had raised her voice so much when I was standing close to her in the same room.

“We were ...” I started, but Mother placed her full hand over my mouth.

I had always looked forward to visiting my grandparents, but this time was different. The brand new sleigh I had craved for so long was finally mine, a surprise gift from my parents on Saint Nicholas Day, a day considered by many in Germany and Austria as a gift-giving day without religious connotation. The sleigh was leaning against the wall in one corner of my room. Every morning I could see its shiny wooden slats and bright runners. I had used it only twice. Going meant I would not be able to use it and the parks were covered with fresh snow. Nor would my teddy bear be allowed to come with me. *Mutti* had never allowed me to take him on previous trips. A family friend had bought the stuffed toy before my first birthday. When placed into my crib, the docile bear — larger than I was — provoked such screaming that my parents stored him in an armoire and out of sight for months. Now having to leave Teddy behind was the thing I disliked about our trips to Poland.

Through free-flowing tears, I tried to cajole my mother into relenting. “Just this time. Please, *Mutti*.”

“The answer is no.”

Although her voice had a determined tone, I was not deterred. “Why not?”

She looked tired, drawn and annoyed at my persistence. “Just do as I tell you. Please.”

Dashing from the room to get away from her, I shouted, “I hate you!”

Millie kept sitting in the anteroom. In those last four days she had spent so much time listening to the radio that she had done nothing else around the house. Worse yet, she, who for the past three years had been my solace and comfort, was now coldly indifferent to my pain. Two months and thirteen days from my eighth birthday, in our own home, surrounded by the people I loved, I felt alone and abandoned.



Eric's grandfather *Opapa* with Uncle Norman in Lwow, Poland, in August 1939, less than one month before the German invasion.

Later that afternoon, my parents exited the bedroom. Father, in his fur-lined overcoat, carried two suitcases. Mother, wearing not her fur coat but her cloth overcoat, tried to be warm and friendly.

“Millie,” she said, “we will be gone for only a few days.”

The young servant never looked up. She seemed not to have heard.

My mother stood silently for more than a moment. “Here is money in case you need to buy something for the house. If you need anything else, you know you can call the hotel.”

The woman made no attempt to reach for the money. Mother placed it on the table, near the radio. As she did, she spotted the daily paper lying on the floor. Staring at her was a full-page picture of Adolf Hitler. Abruptly my mother turned to my father.

“Get a taxi and make sure you find one flying the Nazi flag.” Her voice had a slight quiver.

Papa was back a few minutes later. We were ready to leave and, as I walked backward toward the door, my eyes remained focused on Millie. Oh, how I loved her and I was certain she loved me. Why else would she have taken me to spend the past two summers at her parents' farm? I stopped and waited.

Very softly, hesitantly I called: “Millie.”

She never raised her head to look at me.

*Mutti* grabbed me by the arm. “Let's go!”

Life was so cruel! I was leaving behind my Millie and my Teddy. I didn't know one could hurt so much inside. The taxi was waiting. Its front fenders flew two small red flags bearing a strange black cross similar to the Austrian cross. Once we were in the car, *Mutti* told me what a swastika was. The



driver held the door for my mother. She stepped in, immediately lowered the side curtain and fell back onto the seat. I didn't know whether she wanted to avoid seeing what was going on outside or to prevent anyone else from seeing us inside.

During the ride I stole some glimpses of the outside world. A circle of agitated people surrounded two kneeling, well-dressed women washing the sidewalk.

“What are they doing?” I asked.

My father made a small opening in the curtain and glanced out. He leaned over to Mother and, with a hand cupped over his mouth, he whispered. “Just what I was telling you. They want those poor women to rub off the oil-painted Austrian symbols with their furs.”

I remembered having asked my father why all those Austrian emblems had been painted on sidewalks and bridges. “To celebrate the new year,” he had said.

The cab dropped us off at the main entrance of *Südbahnhof*, one of the city's train terminals. The driver lifted our two suitcases from the luggage rack and placed them on the curb. Papa looked around for a porter but none was in sight. “Take the bags and let's go!” *Mutti* said, nervously.

The railroad station, with its hollow-sounding interior, was not as I remembered it from our previous trips. Soldiers were everywhere. Prominent on the sleeves of their black uniforms was a red armband with the same funny looking black cross that I had seen on the taxi's flags.

“My God, we're surrounded by the SS,” *Mutti* whispered. I noticed that she trembled.

“What is SS?” I asked.

Mother ignored my question. My father put the suitcases on the floor of the large hall. It was March, still winter in Vienna, yet perspiration had formed on his forehead. He had carried the luggage up the long stairway and halfway into the hall and now stood there out of breath. I had hardly ever seen my father lift anything heavier than a glass of water.

He used his breast-pocket handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his face, then walked away, leaving us standing there. Mother paced stiffly around the two valises. Soon Papa returned, escorted by a soldier in that sinister black uniform.

The man, apparently an officer, turned to my mother, clicked the heels of his highly polished boots and raised an arm in a snappy salute. “*Heil* Hitler!” he blurted.

My mother nodded and smiled.

“Follow me,” he said. Walking with a distinct Prussian step, the soldier led us to a far corner of the station.

“Can you believe this?” *Mutti* mumbled. “Still trying to be chivalrous — even to a Jewish woman?”

“*Sai sha*,” my father shushed her in Yiddish.

More soldiers than travelers filled the immense hall. Echoes reverberating throughout multiplied the harshness of each sound. Men and women wearing the same menacing black outfits constantly clicked their heels and raised their arms in that strange salute. Each click of the heavy boots bounced

off the distant walls and the high ceiling, creating a deafening clamor. I felt like we were surrounded by a whole army.

“You go here and you there!” the officer barked. This was the same man who, only moments before, had saluted us so gallantly.

I cringed and took one step closer to my mother. With one menacing finger he ordered Mother and me toward one door and my father to another.

I held on to *Mutti's* skirt as we moved quickly in the direction the man had pointed. We walked through the door and found ourselves in a small room, made tinier by a very high ceiling and white sheets, draped over metal frames, to partition the space into small cubicles. They reminded me of the oppressive prison cells I had seen in the movies. I looked to *Mutti* for help. She offered none. Her forlorn look — one I had never seen before — made her face seem very small.

“Undress. Take everything off. Everything!” a woman sitting at a small desk shouted. The tone of her voice was similar to the one I had heard in the hall. I was shivering. “*Schnell! Schnell! Ich kann nicht auf die Juden Schweine warten!*” she yelled, ordering us to hurry, hurry, for she could not wait for Jewish pigs.

The fear I had felt over the last four days was pale in comparison to my present terror. If only I could run away or maybe hide somewhere. How could so many people be so heartless?

I stood there, unprotected in that empty space. Catching an encouraging look from my mother, who was standing naked, bashful, and full of fear, I removed my clothes as well, laid them on the floor and waited. I, who once had refused to undress when Papa had taken me to an all-male Turkish bath, now stood stripped, while evil-looking men and women milled all around.

A large woman, wearing a black dress, high black leather boots, and the scary red and black armband on her sleeve, pushed the partition to one side. She seemed tall, perhaps taller than she actually was because of my nakedness. That hair pulled tightly to the back of her head, those thin lips held rigidly together, and her manly gait all exuded a ruthlessness that held me paralyzed. But what terrified me most was the icy, empty look in her eyes, a blank stare that cut through me. I was naked and cold and so frightened!

“Do you have any jewelry?” the woman bellowed.

“No, no! No jewelry, I swear,” *Mutti* protested in a high-pitched voice.

As the big woman's hands searched all of *Mutti's* body, my eyes turned away. I had never seen my mother naked and didn't want to be a witness to my proud parent's indignity.

Then came my turn. I heard the heavy boots hit the pavement and felt the woman's rough, large, sweaty hands grabbing me by the shoulders. Without a sound, she forced open my mouth, looked into my ears, looked under my arms and last, pushed her cold finger into my rectum. I was too crippled by fear to scream and though the physical pain was intolerable, my mental anguish was even more so. Several times she rotated that large searching finger inside me. Dying at that very moment would have

been a relief.

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After what seemed the longest wait of my life, we were allowed to dress and join Papa. The strain on my parents' faces reflected the ordeal they had endured. I felt so helpless and wished I were big and able to comfort them. I wanted to say, "Don't be sad. It's all over." Instead I was just a little boy, not yet eight.

Leaving the vast hall, we walked toward the platform. Papa, bent over by the weight of the two suitcases. *Mutti* and I following close behind. As we reached the train's open door, my mother, breathing with great difficulty, stopped to dry the tears off my face with her pretty embroidered handkerchief. "I want you to forget what just happened."

"Why did they do this to us?" I asked, still trembling.

"Because we're Jewish. Just because we're Jewish."

My father lifted the suitcases on the train and boarded. "I'll find us a compartment. Wait here."

We waited and waited. No sign of my father. *Mutti* was wringing her hands. Finally, Papa's head showed through a partially opened window. "I found us a compartment."

Dad's find was already occupied by five other people. One of the men helped my father lift the suitcases onto the rack, freeing the wooden bench of the second-class cabin for us to sit on. We had removed our overcoats, which Papa had hung on one of the wall hooks.

The train was late leaving the terminal. My parents were nervous. Father looked at his watch every few minutes, almost as if he kept forgetting what time it was. "This train was supposed to leave twenty minutes ago. What's happening?" he asked. I didn't know to whom he was talking since no one responded.

German soldiers dressed in those ghastly black uniforms and those heavy boots, were everywhere. Each time one poked his head into our compartment, *Mutti*, as though hit by some electric shock, stiffened in her seat. Unable to follow her advice to forget, I cringed and broke into a cold sweat at the sound of their every step. After what seemed an eternity, the conductor whistled and the black locomotive, with a deafening blare, spewing white steam and dark smoke, began pulling the train out of the station to the screeching of its iron wheels. But the soldiers, stiff in their black uniforms, continued to mill in the narrow passageway outside our compartment, refusing to give our nerves a moment of rest.

By the time the long line of cars pulled over the maze of rails and onto the open tracks, the sky had become dark and the streetlights were turned on. I leaned out the window and watched as the distance increased between my city and me. Accompanied by the rhythmic clank of the iron rails as they bounced back on the passing wheels, we traveled through the night.

I sat immersed in my own thoughts while my parents, absorbed by their own fears, did not speak for the longest time. The snack cart passed our compartment and Papa bought three sandwiches and two bottles of mineral water.

*Mutti* broke her silence. "Go to sleep," she said. "I'll sing you 'Sonny Boy.'" Since my birth, Mother had put me to sleep with Al Jolson's famous melody. I loved that song and she sang it so well.

This time, however, the song held no appeal. My mind was so mixed up. Before I had wanted to escape; now I was determined not to shut my eyes, fearing that if I did fall asleep something might happen. My eyelids kept closing, for I was exhausted, but I was too stubborn and afraid to give in.

"You'll be tired tomorrow," *Mutti* added gently. I could tell she was not going to insist on my going to sleep.

I didn't even know what time it was, for my beloved silver watch, a special gift my grandfather had given me for *Pesach* on one of our last trips to Poland, had been left behind.

It was still pitch dark when the train stopped and what sounded to me to be foreign-speaking soldiers boarded the train.

"*Passaporto, per favore,*" one said, asking for our passports.

"Why don't they speak Polish?" I asked.

Only after the men left and Mother realized we were no longer in Austria did she share the truth with me. She jumped from her seat. "We are in Italy!" she exclaimed. Then she looked at me, sat, took my hand and, in a soft tone, said: "We are not going to Poland."

Because I was unable to grasp what was going on, that bit of news had little impact on me. But I was excited just being in a new country and my anguish gave way to anticipation.

The border crossing had a big effect on the other passengers. Everyone, silent before, was now engaged in lively conversation. Dad ventured into the corridor, looked right, then left, and shouted with enthusiasm: "No Nazis."

"Not so loud," *Mutti* warned.

There was an air of jubilation in the compartment. All the lights were turned on and snacks were exchanged between passengers.

My father sat next to me and looking out the window, told me of his experiences during the war. "This is where it all happened. Some of the bloodiest battles took place right here. The Italian army tried desperately to push us back but with no success. We were at the top of the mountain and they were down below. You can imagine we made chopped meat out of them." Papa seemed to be reliving those days. "The Italians had mules to carry their big guns. We were set in place and our machine guns just cut them down. *Tat, tat, tat.* Even the animals were killed."

"Did you get wounded?" I asked.

"Oh, no. Never." Then he told me he had been kept from combat because of his flat feet.

"That was a blessing," *Mutti* said. "The Polish army was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and if your father had been allowed to fight, the empire would have collapsed sooner than it did." Mother had regained her sense of humor.

Papa's words created all sorts of fantasies in my fertile mind. As he related stories of battles, I



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