



a novel by

ALAN GRATZ

PRISONER

B-3087

Based on the true story by
RUTH and JACK GRUENER

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By
A L A N G R A T Z

Based on the true story by RUTH and JACK GRUENER

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For Jack,
who survived

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KRAKÓW, POLAND

1939-1942



CHAPTER ONE

If I had known what the next six years of my life were going to be like, I would have eaten more.

I wouldn't have complained about brushing my teeth, or taking a bath, or going to bed at eight o'clock every night. I would have played more. Laughed more. I would have hugged my parents and told them I loved them.

But I was ten years old, and I had no idea of the nightmare that was to come. None of us did. It was the beginning of September, and we all sat around the big table in the dining room of my family flat on Krakusa Street, eating and drinking and talking: my parents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins and me, Jakob — although everybody called me by my Polish name, Yanek.

“‘The Jews must disappear from Europe.’ That's what Hitler said,” Uncle Moshe said, reaching for another pastry. “I don't know how much more clear he could be.”

I shivered. I'd heard Hitler, the German *fuehrer*, give speeches on the radio. *Fuehrer* meant “leader” in German. It was what the Germans called their president now. Hitler was always talking about the “Jewish menace” and how Germany and the rest of Europe should be “Jew free.” I was a Jew, and I lived in Europe, and I didn't want to disappear. I loved my house and my city.

“The British and the French have already declared war on him,” my father said. “Soon the Americans will join them. They won't let Germany roll over all of Europe.”

“He's already annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia,” said Uncle Abraham. “And now he invades Poland!”

My father sipped his coffee. “Mark my words: This war won't last more than six months.”

My uncles argued with him, but he was my father, so I believed him.

“Enough politics,” my mother said. She got up to clear the table, and my aunts helped her. “Yanek, why don't you put on a show for us? He built his own projector.”

I ran to my room to get it. It wasn't a film projector like the one at the movie theater. It was a slide projector I'd made by mounting a lightbulb on a piece of wood and positioning wooden plates with lenses from magnifying glasses in front of it. I could show pictures on the wall, or do shadow-puppet shows. My cousins helped me hang a white sheet in the doorway of the sitting room, and when everyone was seated I plugged in the projector and clicked on the radio. I liked to have musical accompaniment, like a movie sound track. When the radio warmed up, I found a Count Basie song that was perfect and started my show.

Using cardboard cutouts of cowboys, Indians, stagecoaches, and horses I'd glued to sticks, I projected a shadow show about a sheriff in the American Wild West who had to protect his town from bandits. John Wayne Westerns were my favorite films, and I took all the best parts from his movies and made them one big story. My family laughed and cheered and called out to the characters like they were real. They loved my shows, and I loved putting them on for them. I was never prouder than

when I got my father to laugh!

Maybe one day I would go to America and work in the movies. Aunt Gizela would often ruffle my wavy hair and say, “You look like a movie star, Yanek — with your dark-blond hair and big eyes

I was just getting to the part where the bandit leader robbed the town bank and was squaring off for a shoot-out with the hero when the music on the radio stopped midsong. At first I thought the radio’s vacuum tube had blown, but then a man’s voice came on the radio.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt this broadcast with the news that the German army has reached Kraków.”

“No!” my father said.

“So soon?” Uncle Moshe said. “It’s been only six days! Where is the Polish army?”

I came out from behind the sheet in the doorway to listen. While the radio announcer talked about Polish forces withdrawing to Lodz and Warsaw, there was a big *BOOM*, and my mother’s teacups rattled in their saucers. My cousins and I ran to the window to look outside. Dark smoke curled into the sky over the rooftops of Podgórze, our neighborhood. Someone cried out on the next street, and the church bells of Wawel Cathedral rang out in alarm.

It was too late. The Germans were here. If I had only known then what I know now, I would have run. I wouldn’t have stopped to pack a bag, or say good-bye to my friends, or to even unplug my projector. None of us would have. We would have run for the woods outside of town and never looked back.

But we didn’t. We just sat there in my family’s flat, listening to the radio and watching the sky over Kraków turn black as the Germans came to kill us.

CHAPTER TWO

German soldiers filled the streets of Kraków. They marched in their smart gray uniforms with their legs locked straight and thrown out in front of them the way ducks walk. It was silly, but eerie at the same time. There were so many of them, all marching in time together, their shiny green helmets and polished black jackboots glinting in the sun. Each of the soldiers wore a greatcoat and a pack on his back, and they carried rifles over their shoulders and bayonets at their sides.

I felt small in my little blue woolen jacket and pants and my simple brown cap. There were tanks too — panzers, they called them — great rumbling things with treads that clanked and cannons that swiveled on top.

We came out to watch. All of us: men, women, and children, Poles and Jews. We stood on the street corners and watched the Germans march through our city. Not all of Poland had fallen, the radio told us — Warsaw still held out, as did Brześć, Siedlce, and Lodz. But the Germans were our masters now, until our allies the British and the French arrived to drive them out.

“The Nazis won’t be so bad,” an old Polish woman on the sidewalk next to me said as I watched them. “I remember the Germans from the World War. They were very nice people.”

But of course she could say that. She wasn’t a Jew.

For weeks we tried to live our lives as though nothing had changed, as though an invading army hadn’t conquered us. I went to school every day, my father and uncles and cousins still went to work, and my mother still went to the store. But things were changing. At school, the Polish boys wouldn’t play soccer with me anymore, and no Poles or Germans bought shoes from my father’s store. Food became scarce too, and more expensive.

Then one morning I walked to school and it was canceled. For good, I was told. No school for Jews. The other children celebrated, but I was disappointed. I loved to read — any and all books. But especially books about America, and books about doctors and medicine.

I wandered the streets, watching the German soldiers and their tanks, the breadlines that stretched around the block. Winter was coming, and the men and women in line held their coats tight around them and stamped their feet to stay warm. When I went home at lunchtime, my father was there, which surprised me. He usually ate lunch at work. Uncle Moshe was with him at the table. My mother came out of the kitchen and worried over me.

“Are you sick, Yanek?” She put a hand to my forehead. “Why are you home early from school?”

“It’s closed,” I told her, feeling depressed. “Closed for Jews.”

“You see? You see?” Uncle Moshe said. He turned to my father, looking worked up. “First they close the schools. Next it will be your shoe store. My fur shop! And why not? No one will buy from us with Nazi soldiers telling people, ‘Don’t buy from Jews.’”

“But, if they close the shoe store, how will you make money?” I asked my father.

“Jews are not to make money!” Moshe said. “We have ration cards now for food. With *Js* all over them. *J* for Jew.”

“This will pass,” my father said. “They’ll crack down for a time, and then things will get easier again. It’s always the same. We just have to keep our heads down.”

“Yes,” Moshe said. He tapped the open newspaper between him and my father. “Jews must keep their heads down and not look Germans in the face. We can’t speak unless spoken to. We can’t walk on the main streets of our own city. We can’t use the parks, the swimming pools, the libraries, the cinemas!”

Jews couldn’t go to the movie theaters? No! I loved the movies! And the library too? Where would I get books to read if I wasn’t allowed to go to school either? I hurried to Moshe’s side to see what he was talking about. There, in the paper, were “New Rules for the Jews.” My heart sank. It was true: no more parks, no more libraries, no more movie theaters. And there was to be a nightly curfew for all Jews, young and old. We were to be in our houses and off the streets by 9:00 P.M.

“And armbands. Armbands with the Star of David on them!” Uncle Moshe said. “They are marking us. Branding us like the cattle in those American pictures Yanek likes so much! Next they’ll be taking all our money. Mina, tell your husband.”

“What would you have us do, Moshe?” my mother said, putting her hands on my father’s shoulders. “We haven’t the money to leave. And even if we did, where would we go?”

My father reached up to hold my mother’s hand. “We must not lose faith, Moshe.”

“See how easy it is to keep your faith when the Nazis take it away along with everything else,” Moshe told him.

My father smiled. “Let them take everything. They cannot take who we *are*.”

I sat down at the table to eat, and my mother brought out a small tureen of tomato soup, a loaf of bread, and a wedge of cheese.

“So little?” I asked.

“It’s the rationing. The groceries are all closed,” Mother said.

“We’ll make do,” my father said. “We were spoiled before anyway.”

I hadn’t felt spoiled, but I didn’t say anything. I just wished the Germans hadn’t taken my lunch.

Late that night, long after curfew, cries of “Fire!” woke us.

I ran from my bedroom, frightened. “What is it?” I cried when I saw my parents in the living room. “Is our building on fire? What do we do?”

“No,” Father said. “It’s the synagogue.”

The synagogue was the place where we worshiped every Sabbath and where I was studying for my bar mitzvah. I leaned out the window and saw it down the street, engulfed in flames. My father hurried to put his coat on over his pajamas to go and help put out the fire, but a loud *crack!* from the street brought me and my parents to the window again. Another man wearing a coat and pajamas like my father lay dead in the middle of the street, a pool of darkness spreading beneath him, glinting in the streetlights. A German officer stood over him, his pistol still aimed at the dead man.

“Jews are reminded that under the new rules, anyone caught outside their homes after curfew will

be shot on sight!” the officer yelled.

My father stood in the sitting room, his eyes on the door. My mother put a hand to his chest, the her head to his. Some unspoken communication passed between them, and in a few moments my father took his coat off again and sent me back to bed.

CHAPTER THREE

I was twelve years old when the wall began.

Podgórze, our neighborhood, was being walled up. From Zgody Square to the Podgórze market and down along Lasoty Place. The Nazis were walling us in.

I went out to see it. It was nearly three meters tall and made of brick. At the top it had rounded caps like the tops of tombstones. The wall stretched from one building corner to another, right across the street, cutting us off from the rest of Kraków. In the buildings that were part of the wall, they bricked up the windows and doors so no one could escape. There were only three ways in: a gate at Zgody Square, another at the market, and another on Lwowska Street.

I ran from gate to gate to gate, taking it all in. Podgórze was now the Jewish ghetto. All the Poles there who weren't Jews had to move out, and all the Jews who lived outside the ghetto in Kraków had to move *in*.

I watched them moving in. Wave after wave of them. Huge groups of Jews climbing out of trucks and going down Lwowska Street. There were men and women and children, families, teenagers, grandparents. They all wore Star of David armbands like us. Some of them wore the uniforms of the jobs they'd had too: policemen, postmen, nurses, trolley conductors. There were no jobs for Jews anymore. No jobs besides cleaning the toilets of German soldiers. My father and uncle had lost their shops, had their inventories seized by the Nazis, just as Uncle Moshe said they would.

The new Jews carried their luggage with them — everything they owned in the world — and they looked around with big, worried eyes at the buildings and streets of their new home. They were probably hoping that things would be better here than wherever it was they came from, but everything that had happened over the last year had taught us that things always got worse.

There were a few empty flats left by the departing Poles, but not nearly enough for all the new people. My parents came out onto the street and invited a family to come and live with us: the Laskis, a family of three with a seven-year-old boy named Aron. We gave them my bedroom, and I slept in the sitting room. Other families did the same.

Then, as the days went by and more and more Jews poured into the ghetto — not just from Kraków now, but from the villages and towns outside the city — we took in a second family, the Rosenblums, and a third, the Brotmans. The Germans even made it a rule: Every flat must hold at least four families. I no longer had my own bedroom, nor did my parents. The children had one room, and the adults were divided between my parents' bedroom and the sitting room. Only the kitchen was shared by all. There were fourteen of us in a flat that had been cozy for three.

All I ever wanted to do was get out of the house and go play with my friends. It was far too crowded at home. But my parents wouldn't let me go outside for fear I'd be taken up in a work gang. Any time the Germans had work to be done — like scrubbing toilets or helping build the wall — they

grabbed Jews off the street to do it. Father was taken all the time. Sometimes Mother. The Nazis even took people out of the ghetto to work elsewhere in Kraków. Sometimes they never returned.

“This will all be over by summer,” my father told us. “We’ll just have to make do until then.”

He was my father, and I wanted to believe him, but I wasn’t so sure anymore. It was January 1941. The Germans ruled Kraków. I was twelve years old. And for the first time in my life, I had begun to doubt my father.

CHAPTER FOUR

I had always thought it would be fun to have a brother or a sister. That is, until I spent a few months living in my little apartment with five other kids. The bickering, the fighting, the whining — you'd think that soldiers in the streets, and synagogues burning, and days with nothing more to eat than moldy potatoes would be more important than who got to play with the doll or who got to sleep by the window, but you'd be wrong.

The nights were the worst. I pulled my pillow and blanket out into the hall whenever the Rosenblum girls were arguing, which seemed like all the time now. I had to sleep on the floor, but I didn't mind so much. I would be sleeping on the floor here or there, and at least for now I had the whole hall to myself. If we had to take in another family, I thought bitterly, I'd probably have to share the hall too.

I was sound asleep one night when a creak in the hall woke me up. In the darkness, I saw the shape of a person.

"Who's there?" I asked, feeling my heart in my throat.

"Shhhh, Yanek. It's me," my father whispered. "I'm sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep."

Father had his coat on. He was going outside.

"Where are you going?" I asked him. "I want to go with you!"

"No. It's dangerous to be out after curfew."

"Then why are you going?" I was scared. I scrambled out from under my blanket. "Are you going to leave the ghetto?" Anyone caught trying to escape the ghetto was shot on sight.

"No, no. Go back to sleep, Yanek."

"No!" I wanted to help. My father had begun to look so tired lately. The work gangs and the lack of food made him look like he'd aged ten years in two. "I can help be your eyes. To look out for guards. I want to come with you!"

"Shhhh, Yanek. You'll wake everyone else." My father sighed. "All right. But not another word. We must be silent, you understand?"

I nodded and hurried to put on my coat. When I was ready, we slipped out the door and down the stairs. I had never been out this late before. The stairwell was dark and full of shadows. My heart still leaped at every little sound, even with my father there.

My father led me down the stairs like we were going to the building's furnace in the basement, but instead we went out through the back door, into the alley behind our building. Snow fell in big, thick flakes, muffling everything. It was so quiet you could hear the flakes hitting the snow that was already on the ground. *Tick. Tick. Tick tick.*

I followed my father through the silent alley. Our footprints left tracks in untrodden snow. I looked behind me, suddenly worried that we were leaving a trail that would be easy to follow. But the

falling snow was already covering our tracks. I prayed for more of it, even though more would mean new work details — for my father and other Jewish men — to clear it in the morning.

We had to cross at Jozefinska Street, which meant we would be out in the open. Down the block a German soldier in a greatcoat, scarf, and hat cupped his hands to his face to light a cigarette. My father put a hand to my chest, and we flattened ourselves against the wall in the shadow of an apartment building. I watched the German soldier breathe out a long cloud of smoke. The red ember of his cigarette glowed in the darkness. Where was he from? What was his name? Did he have a family? Children, like me? Did he hate Jews the way Hitler did? Had he ever killed a man?

The Nazi rubbed his hands together, stomped his feet to clear the snow and cold from them, and walked around the corner, out of sight.

“Now,” my father whispered, and we hurried across the street, our feet crunching so loudly in the quiet night air I thought everyone on the block must hear us. I’d crossed that street a hundred times — a thousand times — but it had never felt so wide, the other side so far away. When we reached the alley across the street we stopped, leaning against a wall again while we caught our breaths and listened to see if anyone had heard us. The only sound was the falling of the snow. *Tick. Tick. Tick tick.*

My father led me a short way on, and I began to realize where we were going: Uncle Abraham’s bakery! The Nazis had let him keep it to bake bread for the soldiers. As we pushed on the door to go inside, something caught: A towel was stuffed into the crack along the floor. As soon as we were inside, I understood why.

Bread. The wonderful, beautiful smell of bread! The aroma alone made my stomach growl. I had learned to live with hunger, but now that my body knew there was fresh baked bread to be had, it could barely contain itself. I shook with anticipation. My father replaced the towel under the door, and we made our way down the dark corridor to the ovens. Uncle Abraham and Aunt Fela had covered every window and door with towels, sheets, blankets, anything that would block out the light — and the smell.

“Oskar!” Uncle Abraham said to my dad when we found them. He hugged my father, and I ran to where Aunt Fela was pulling racks of bread from the oven.

“And I see you brought a helper,” Aunt Fela said. “Hello, Yanek.” She smiled at me, but I only had eyes for the bread. Golden brown loaves that glistened and steamed in the cool air. I felt my mouth water.

Fela laughed. “Take one.”

“*After* we work,” my father said, and my heart burst. How could I possibly wait? He turned to my uncle. “What can we do? Are you firing both ovens?” my father asked.

“Only one for bread,” Uncle Abraham said. He opened the second oven to show it was empty. “In this one, we’re burning wet wood, to help cover the smell of the bread with the smoke. We weren’t able to save enough flour to bake in both ovens all the time anyway. We must make it last. Another month? Another two? Another year?”

“Spring,” my father said. “The British and the French will be here by then.”

Uncle Abraham shrugged. “It may be the Russians get here first. The peace can’t last.” Seventeen

days after Germany had invaded Poland from the west, the Soviet Union had invaded from the east. Poland was split right down the middle, and the Germans and Russians had promised not to fight each other. For now. “In the meantime, we’ll bake when we can. But if the Nazis find out ...”

“Come, let’s get to it,” my father said. “Yanek and I will feed the fires.”

We worked into the wee hours of the morning — Father and I feeding wood and coal into the ovens, Uncle Abraham making dough, Aunt Fela pulling those delectable loaves from the racks and putting them in sacks.

“We must get you back before light,” Uncle Abraham said at last. “Here. Take three sacks apiece. That should be enough to sell on Krakusa Street, plus one sack for yourself.”

A whole sack of bread, just for us! I almost moaned at the thought of such a feast.

“Moshe is coming by tomorrow to pick up sacks to sell to the families on Wegierska Street,” Abraham said. “And Dawid and Sala tomorrow night, to sell to Rekawka Street.”

“How much per loaf?” Father asked.

Abraham shrugged. “Five zloty, perhaps.”

Five zloty! A loaf of bread usually cost no more than half a zloty!

“I hate to be so mercenary, but the price of flour has gone up too.”

“You can still buy flour?” Father asked.

“There are boys who have already found holes in the wall, ways to get out. They can buy things on the other side. For a price,” Aunt Fela said.

“These new Jews, they have more money too. They can afford it,” Abraham said. “Now go, before it’s light.”

“Enjoy your bread, Yanek,” Aunt Fela said. She kissed my forehead, and Abraham and my father hugged each other good-bye.

When we left, it was still dark outside, and still snowing. There would be more patrols, and the ghetto would soon be waking. There was no time to waste.

“Once more then, Yanek, to home. And then we shall have fresh bread for breakfast. How does that sound?”

“Delicious,” I said.

Father put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. “We just have to survive the winter, Yanek, and then everything will be better. You’ll see.”

I still worried he was wrong, but fresh bread made me forget all my troubles. For a little while, at least.

CHAPTER FIVE

1942 came, but the British didn't. Nor did the French. They were too busy fighting the Germans in the west. The radio talked about the fighting in Denmark and Norway and Belgium and the Netherlands, but since it was a German station, they always said they were winning. Uncle Moshe said we couldn't trust anything we heard, but he listened to every word anyway, just like the rest of us.

All I cared about was getting out of our crowded house for some freedom and fresh air, but my parents were still worried I'd be snatched up by the Nazis. The snow was still thick on the ground, with more falling every day, and Jews were put to work shoveling it off the streets. The Nazis also took Jews away to work in Kraków's factories. Some of the truckloads of Jews never came back, but nobody knew what happened to them. My parents didn't want to take any chances one way or another, so I had to stay in our building at all times.

I took my ball into the hallway outside our apartment and practiced kicking it against the wall until mean old Mrs. Immerglick across the hall came out and yelled at me to stop. I was just about to go downstairs to the basement to play when I heard a scream from one of the lower floors. Then footsteps. Lots of footsteps. A door smashing. More screams.

I ran back inside our flat. "Mama! Mama!" I called to my mother. "Something is happening in the building!"

Everyone staying in our apartment came together in the sitting room. We listened as the screams and crashes grew closer. I felt sick. I wished my father were there with us, but he had gone out to stand in line for our vegetable rations.

THUMP THUMP THUMP. Someone pounded on our door, and we all jumped.

"Open up, on authority of the Judenrat!"

Everyone looked to my mother. It was our flat, after all. But she just watched the door with big, round eyes. My heart was racing. What should we do? What *could* we do?

"Mama?" I said.

THUMP THUMP THUMP.

"Open the door or we'll break it down!" said another voice, this time in German. A Nazi.

"Mama," I said, "if we don't open up, they'll shoot us!"

My mother stared at the door. None of the other parents made a move.

I had to do something. I hurried to the door and unlocked it, and a German officer and a Judenrat police officer pushed past me down the hall. The Judenrat were the Jews the Nazis put in charge of the ghetto, and they had special police officers who had to take orders from the Nazis.

"When we tell you to open the door, open the door!" the German officer told the adults. The families huddled together, hugging one another tight. "Do you have jewels? Gold? A radio?" he demanded.

My mother didn't answer. She just stared at the Nazi and trembled. He was getting madder, I could tell. The officer took a step toward my mother, and I spoke up.

"In the kitchen!" I said.

The German turned to look at me with his cold blue eyes, then nodded to the Jewish policeman, who carried a sack.

"Your valuables," the officer said. "Now. Or you will all be taken away."

Someone screamed across the hall. Old Mrs. Immerglick and her family were being dragged away by German soldiers. Her son, a man my father's age, had blood running down his forehead.

"Give it to them!" I yelled. "Give them anything they want!"

The other families in our flat scrambled to give the Nazi officer everything they had squirreled away: little bits of jewelry, a pocket watch, a handful of zloty. The member of the Judenrat came out of our kitchen with his sack stuffed with more than just our radio and went into the bedrooms, looking for anything more of value.

The German officer pulled the necklace from my mother's neck, and twisted her wedding ring from her finger. She flinched when he did it, but she didn't say a word.

"This flat can stay," the German officer said, pocketing my mother's jewelry. "But next time, open the door more quickly, or we will send you to the east with the rest."

"Yes, sir. We will, sir!" I said.

The two men left, and we all stood frozen, listening to the shouts and sobs above us and below us. Out on the streets, two big gray military trucks pulled up, and Jews from our apartment building and all the buildings around us were herded into them by German soldiers. They carried nothing with them. No suitcases, no extra clothes, no food, no personal belongings. Wherever they were going, they would have to do without.

Something clattered in the hall outside. The doors to our flat and the Immerglicks' apartment were still open. I could see an overturned table and lamp in their flat, but nothing more. Why had the Immerglicks and the families living with them been taken, and we hadn't? The officer said it was because we gave them our valuables, but the Immerglicks had a radio and jewelry and zloty, just like us. The Germans had taken the Immerglicks for no more reason than that they felt like it.

A shot rang out in the street, and we all jumped again.

"Yanek," Mr. Rosenblum whispered. "The door."

I glanced at my mother, but she was a million miles away. Her eyes were focused on the rug at our feet, her face empty of emotion. I don't know if she had even heard the shot. I tiptoed down the entrance hall and closed the door, flipping the lock with a *click*. It didn't make me feel any safer.

When the trucks in the street were full, they pulled away. We never heard where they went. My father could have been on one of them, for all I knew.

My mother sat at the table, her mind still elsewhere. At this time of day, she would usually be in the kitchen, preparing whatever rations we had for lunch, but that was no use now. Our cupboards had been cleared out in the raid. We had nothing to eat.

The other families retreated to their rooms to see what had been taken and what was left. The

Rosenblum girls wailed like they were trying to outdo each other in volume, so I slipped out into the hall. The door to the Immerglucks' flat was still open, and someone was inside. It was Mr. Tatarka, from down the hall. When he heard the *click* of the door behind me he whirled. One of the Immerglucks' nice cushioned sitting-room chairs was in his hands. He opened his mouth to say something, got flustered, then hurried out past me. He took the chair with him.

I walked the hallway on my floor, looking in at the empty rooms. Four flats, sixteen families, all gone. Only two had their doors shut — us and the Tatarkas. Five flats were empty on the floor above us, but only three on the top floor. Maybe the Germans got tired of walking up all those steps.

I went back to the stairs and realized for the first time that there was another set of stairs going up, even though this was the top floor. I'd never had any friends on the top floor, so I had gone up once or twice in the past to run an errand. I stared down the stairwell, listening for a new invasion of Germans, but everything was quiet and still. I climbed the extra flight of stairs.

There was a big steel door at the top. I opened it a crack and looked outside. The roof! This door led out onto the roof! How had I not known this was here? But then, even if I had known, my parents would never have let me come up here. Not in the past, when things like bedtimes and homework and safe places to play had been important. None of that mattered now, and I pushed my way outside and stood on the roof of our building.

It was flat and covered with gravel. Pipes and conduits stuck up out of the roof here and there. The roof's edges, a little more than half a meter all the way around, were plastered with black tar. Strangest of all was a small wooden shack built up against the big brick chimney. It had a thin wooden door, and when I went inside, I found heaps of garbage and feathers and bird droppings. A pigeon coop! Mr. Immerglick's pigeon coop, probably. When I was a little boy, all I knew about the old man who lived across the hall was that he loved pigeons, but I had never imagined he kept a coop on the roof. The pigeons were all gone now, just like Mr. Immerglick; he died a year before the Nazis came. But this shack on the roof ... if it was repaired a little, cleaned up, maybe had some electricity running to it from the power lines that came into the building from the roof ... My mind was racing.

I ran back downstairs as fast as I could and burst into my flat.

"Mama!" I cried.

I found my mother in the kitchen, hugging my father. He was alive!

He broke away from her when I came running in, worried.

"What is it, Yanek?" he asked. "Are they coming back?"

"No! No. I want to show you something I found. Come quick!"

My parents followed me up the stairs, walking when I wanted them to run. Finally I pulled them out onto the roof and showed them the pigeon coop.

"Don't you see? With a little work, we could live here!"

"Leave our flat?" Father asked.

"Just the three of us," I told them. "It's so crowded downstairs. Here we can have a space all to ourselves. We can scrub the floor and the walls, clean it up. And I can wire up a light — the light from my projector! And a hot plate, for cooking on. There's no bathroom, but we could always go back downstairs for that. And in the winter, we'll have the chimney to keep us warm."

“I don’t know, Yanek,” my father said.

My mother hadn’t come inside the coop. Instead she stood just outside, staring back at the big steel door that opened onto the roof.

“We can bring up chairs,” I told my father. “And a mattress, and —”

“Bars,” my mother said. It was the first thing I’d heard her say since the Nazis burst into our flat. “Can you put bars ... on the door?” She stared at it, but I could tell her thoughts were still downstairs, reliving the invasion of our home.

My father came out of the coop and put his arm around my mother’s shoulders.

“Yes, Mina. We will fix up the coop and live here, and we will put bars on the door. Yanek and I will see to it.”

We gave our flat to the Rosenblums. The Brotmans were already moving into the Immerglicks’ apartment across the hall. All the empty flats in our building would soon be overflowing with families as more Jews were marched in through the gates. But for a short time at least, we would all live like normal people again.

While my father and I worked to clean the coop, my mother sat on the roof and sewed hidden pockets into the linings of our coats. Inside them, she hid all the money and valuables we had left. She never said another word though, all that day.

Father and I found four heavy steel bars in the basement. By sundown, we lifted the last of them onto the door to the roof. They slid into place so we could take them off to go out, but so that no one from inside the stairs could push through.

“There,” I told my mother. “No one will be able to break in ever again.”

CHAPTER SIX

The pigeon coop became our home, and no Nazi was the wiser.

I was old enough that my parents couldn't keep me inside all the time now. I took my mother's place in line for our rations, and sometimes my father and I were pulled off the street to work outside the ghetto. But each day we returned to our little sanctuary on the roof and slid the steel bars down tight to protect us. Mother began to talk again, and to smile, but every now and then I would catch her staring at the door to the roof, and I knew what she was thinking.

The home invasions continued without warning, slowly bleeding everything of value the ghetto still hoarded. And once a week — on the Sabbath — the Nazis would conduct “Resettlements,” when they came and took more people away. Thousands at a time, pushed into trucks and taken to villages “in the east.” Some who were taken escaped and sneaked back to the ghetto, and they told stories of camps where Jews were worked to death. My father told me not to listen to the rumors, but we were still careful to bar the big steel door at the top of the stairs every night, and every time we heard the cries and screams of a new Resettlement we huddled in fear.

I was almost thirteen years old now, and it was hard to remember any other life — except for my daydreams of food. *Bigos* stew, with meat and mushrooms and cabbage. Roast chicken. Cucumber salad. Pierogi filled with potatoes, cheese, and onions, fried in butter. Cheesecake, apple tarts. I would have traded a week's worth of rations just to have another pot of my mother's delicious tomato soup. With each passing day I grew thinner and thinner, until hunger was my constant companion. I longed for nighttime, and the blessed relief sleep brought. The only time I didn't think about eating was when I was asleep.

One cold February day, the director of the Judenrat called for a ghetto-wide meeting in Zgody Square, and my father and I went to hear what he had to say. The director was not a popular man. The members of the Judenrat were hated throughout the ghetto for working with the Nazis. But any man the Nazis assigned to the Judenrat who refused was shot or hanged, so I didn't see what choice they had. Some of the Judenrat police enjoyed their new jobs too much, it was true, but there were others who tried to do what the Germans told them without making things worse for their fellow Jews.

The square was crowded, but not everyone in the ghetto was there. Not nearly. The director could tell this too. He checked his watch one last time and bent forward to speak into the microphone. “When I call for a meeting, all of you must come!” he told us. “Tell your neighbors. Hiding away will not help!”

I glanced nervously at my father.

“We're afraid we'll be taken away!” someone yelled.

“Or shot and killed in the street!” someone else said.

The director signaled for everyone to settle down. “My friends, I come to you with a terrible

request, but one which I have no choice but to accede to. The Nazis have ordered me to give them seven thousand Jews, to be deported from the Kraków ghetto tomorrow morning.”

The crowd came alive with murmurs and sobs and shouts. *Seven thousand Jews!* I thought, trying to comprehend a number so big. There had been Resettlements going on all the while, but nothing on this scale. Never so many people.

“We can do nothing about this! Seven thousand people *will* be deported! But we can choose who will go and who will remain.”

“*You* can choose, you mean!” someone yelled.

“The Germans need good, healthy workers here in the ghetto,” the director said.

“You call this healthy?” a man cried. “I haven’t eaten meat in a year!”

Others in the crowd shouted angrily that they were starving. I nodded, feeling my own hunger pangs.

“If we prove ourselves useful to the German war effort, they will take fewer of us away. They will keep us here, and keep us alive!” the director said. “We must therefore think carefully about who we send away, and who remains. We must give them those who cannot work.”

More murmuring among the crowd. “Who can he mean?” I asked my father. Everyone in the ghetto worked. Even my mother had been taken to the factories when she was caught out on the streets.

“My friends,” the director said, “I must reach out my arms and beg: Mothers and fathers, give me your children!”

The crowd in the square erupted with rage. Angry shouts were raised from every mouth. Fists shook in the air. An empty green bottle flew through the air and shattered at the base of the stage where the director stood. I was scared but I felt angry too. I held on to my father’s arm.

“They go to a better place!” the director said, ducking a rock. “The children will be sent to resettlement camps!”

“Work camps!” someone near me yelled.

“*Death camps!*” another person cried.

“*I am trying to save lives!*” the director roared. “Do you understand? Which is better, that forty thousand of us remain, or that the whole population perish? We must choose!”

“They can’t do this,” I told my father. “Why does he get to choose who goes and who stays?”

The reality was starting to hit me: I was going to be sent to a camp. I was going to be sent away from my mother and father. Away from my home!

The crowd yelled and argued with the director, surging toward the stage. My father put his hand on my shoulders and steered me away. “Come, Yanek. Let’s go.”

I couldn’t believe what I’d heard. “Papa, how can he ask such a thing?”

“Because the Nazis have promised not to take him and his family, and people will do anything to protect their families. He should know that better than anyone.”

“I don’t want to go! Don’t let them take me,” I said. I could feel myself trembling, but I didn’t want to let on just how deeply terrified I was.

“They won’t,” my father told me. “I’ll protect you.” He smiled. “Besides, tomorrow you will no

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