



Jewish Federation
of Greater Philadelphia

Jewish Community Relations Council

Mordechai Anielewicz Creative Arts Competition 2020

Writing Winners: Poetry and Prose

Grades 7-12

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Poetry

Grades 7-8

First Prize: **Naomi Johannesen**, Grade 8, Stetson Middle School, Teacher: Peter Stolzer

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I Remember

I remember

The sounds of people laughing, kids playing, and families singing with joy

Now I hear

Moans of pain, cries for help, and grumbling from shrunken, starving stomachs

I remember

When I wore silky, red dresses, pink bows, and shiny black heels

Now I wear

Faded blue and white striped pajamas with thick, black numbers inked into my pallid skin

I remember

When the birds sang a honey-sweet song to the world

Now

They croak bitter words of sorrow and farewell

I remember

My mother's radiant smile and my little brother's dimpled, plump cheeks

Now

All that is left

Are memories

Painful in their joy

I hold onto them

As my last bit of hope

Yellow Star Bunker

Through the eyes of a child who should never know hunger
There's a cold dark diseased yellow star bunker
She was taken away from the ones that she loved
Unable to fight the push and the shove

Across broken streets of shattered glass
Dreams have been taken by the mass
Crammed in a wagon meant for cattle
She didn't know of the dangers she'd battle

They burned all her books that revealed the truth
Spines to the books like necks to a noose
people die fast except the Germans of course
And the Hitler youth, kids trained to enforce

Through the eyes of a child who should never know hunger
There's a cold dark diseased yellow star bunker
She was taken away from the ones that she loved
Unable to fight the push and the shove

She was taken to a camp and she didn't believe
The sign on the gate that said work sets you free
She was inspected just like a dog in a show
She hoped she was strong, she was too young to go

She was taken to a shower that was supposed to be clean
But with life and death there is no in between
She was lying on the floor in a minute's time
And only few knew her name when she died

Through the eyes of a child who should never know hunger
There's a cold dark diseased yellow star bunker
She was taken away from the ones that she loved
Unable to fight the push and the shove

What Lay Behind

We stood there,
Shaking,
Glass breaking,
Humiliated and betrayed

We counted,
Confounded,
At how many had been
“taken away”

We succumbed,
When packed in tight,
No food, No drink, No necessities,
No Light

We looked,
Up at the sign,
Wishing, praying?
for what lay behind

A Prayer

They eat beans mostly, this old, wizened yellow pair
Watching them eat something else is really quite rare
Their old vivid memories
Have earned them lots of accessories
But what Bubbeh and Zaydeh have won
Well, these stories are never done

A silver and red cross medal sits on a shelf
Grandpa shows it off as pride for himself
Grandma keeps a little white dress
But this is not shown to impress

See, there was once a tiny hidden girl
With nothing but a glossy pearl
Who lost her youth long, long ago
With this handmade dress along in tow

And there was a young, impressionable man
Who had a big, complicated plan
To get he and his people out of slavery
To prove his worth and his bravery

But Zaydeh went to camp, but not for fun
He was always planning to run from a gun
And Bubbeh is an expert at hide and seek
She trained herself never to make a squeak

Soon the young man met his future wife
Together they have a great and wonderful life
Time now they will never ever waste

The past is over, the future they embrace

This old, yellow, courageous pair

Never ends a day without a prayer

And when I leave Grandma and Grandpa's front hall

My miniscule issues seem a little petty and small.

*a "silver and red cross medal" describes an Auschwitz Survivor Medal

Works Cited

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The Fight is Over

Nazi at the door
Rapid German
Sudden panic
Shoved around
Nowhere to run
Many people around us
Mama, Papa, Eliza and me
Friends from every street
Thrown in a train
Hot, humid
Sickness everywhere
Darkness swarms
Hours sitting
Suffocation
Confusion
Need food
Water
“Get out!”
Fall on the ground
Separated
Hair is gone
Stripped of clothes
Number tattoo
169061
Backbreaking labor
Exhausted
Losing hope
Work for 12 hours
Food scarce
Limited abilities
Papa’s gone

Eliza's barely holding on
Mama's fighting
Months and months go by
Lose track of time
Weaker and weaker
Eliza's gone
Mama's losing it
Too weak to work
Desperate to keep going
Gas chambers
Go to sleep
Mama and I both
Scared like never before

Want the pain to stop
We are leaving now
Shivering
Doors slam
Time running out
Nowhere to go
We hold each other tight
The fight
Is
Over

Never Again

There I sat,
Wide eyed.
6 million dead,
My teacher said.
I tried to conjure an image,
but it was incomprehensible.
My small mind couldn't grasp it.

6 million persecuted,
Jailed,
Murdered
In cold blood
By rules that declared they were inferior,
A real dilemma for a little elementary school girl.

So long ago was this tragedy,
Distanced by time and thousands of miles.
Never again will people be treated like this, I thought.
The cries of millions will not be extinguished across the sea,
Never sent back into the wind,
Never again.

Yet in sixth grade, I sat:
Eight hundred thousand dead in Rwanda,
Brothers and friends turned on one another,
Slaughtered by the thousands in safe havens,
Lives gone like grains of sand blown into the wind.

But I didn't worry;

Across the vast ocean
In war torn Africa
So many reasons for it to be ignored,
Never again.

And there I was again in 8th grade,
Watching a presentation on the Cambodian genocide:
2 million
Murdered
By yet another evil government regime.
People scream for help
and get no answer.

And it's as if
History
Is
Repeating
Itself.

Again and again,
No one is listening.

And not but a few months later
I heard of a synagogue shooting
Just 4 hours away in Pittsburgh.
My Jewish friend told me,
Her eyes full of sadness.

I looked into her eyes,
Not conceiving that only 75 years ago
She would have been taken for her beliefs.
And after everything the world has done

That acts like this could still go on today.

Never again

Is no longer

enough.

I hung on,
Now only in my heart,
To what was left,
Of my frail, pale, father

I was stripped,
Of all that made me,
Me,
And was striped
And numbered
And frozen
And starved
And worked

I looked awhile,
Beyond the sign,
Wishing,
for what lay behind

The world watches in silence
it sits, and stares
turning a cheek now and again
the movement
tugging and pulling at its tape covered lips

The world holds in it's calloused grasp
no obligation to listen

attentively

to the cries of the innocent

to the prayers to the holy

to the songs of the people

the world cared not for those in torment

it handed them gingerly over

to the oppressors

today

the sky

speckled with golden stars

glistens

and remembers how the world remained

how the world remains

silent

The Star

How can one little thing cause so much pain?
How can one little thing tear our neighborhood apart?

That one little thing worn upon my tattered, small coat
Never to be taken off,
Mother's quick, messy stitches
Binding it to me, permanently.

This thing that I love, that I celebrate,
How can others not see its beauty?

But it has stopped me from playing with friends --
No hopscotch, no hide and seek --
And from walking to school
Down the tree-lined pavement.

"We are not like them," Mother said,
Her voice, as sharp as a knife,
"Now we are different."

But I felt the same.
I hadn't changed.
So how am I different?

Stars all around me,
Countless stars, being dulled by the darkening sky.
Stars are meant to shine
But not us;
Are we here to be forgotten?

Under the Floorboards

The house
Is quiet
And cold.
The walls creak.
Shadows dance
Along the walls.
The moonlight shines
Through the windows
Onto the floor.
The beams shed light
On a scene
Of chaos.

Shelves have fallen.
Their contents lay askew.
Chairs toppled
And cushions torn.
Lights from the tree
And ornaments
Are shattered.
Ripped and broken photos,
Their subjects still smiling from the ground.
The December chill
Lingers.
It is quiet.

The chair.
Once blue as the night sky,
It is now caked
With dirt.

It lays on its side,
Stuffing spewing out,
Gutted.
Beneath it lies the floor.
But what remains
Under the floor
Is what truly matters most.
It is the reason
The men were here.

The fateful knock
That night.
Just a few months ago.
Cracking open the door
To see
A broken family
On the steps.
A flash of yellow
Emblazoned on their clothes
A girl.
Young like me.
But not for long.

When the rumors began,
We were worried.
But how could we know
It would come
To this?
We denied the rumors
For their sake
And ours.

We hoped that they, too,
Would become hidden,
Buried beneath the floor.
But the men found out.
The men always find out.

They came with their guns and their axes
That horrid band around their arms.
Ripping things apart
Running
Shouting
Breaking.
All we could do was watch
While these men tore through our home
As a child tears through the wrappings
At Christmas.

Their mistake
Was flipping the chair.
I push with all I have left.
The chair moves
With a harsh, but muffled sound.
Slowly,
The floorboards beneath
Emerge.

I push the chair upright.
And pry up the floor.
As I gaze at the darkness beneath,
It seems to gaze back.
A cast iron pot lies on the stove.
It holds the extra soup.

Leftovers.
From a meal
We enjoyed
In daylight.
The pot weighs less
Then I thought it would.
I worry it is not
Enough.

The stairs are bitter cold.
My bare toes are frozen
On the wood.
The darkness despairs.
But the smiling warmth of the pot
Reminds me
Of hope,
And a glance at the corner
Reminds me
To be strong.

A small family huddles together.
Blankets surround them,
Defending them from winter's fury.
As the months have gone by
They have aged
Many years.
The girl
Was once
So young.
As I carry their meager soup
I think how lucky
We were

That the men pushed
That chair.
It saved our lives
And theirs.

Living Under The Same God

A lanky, bearded, American man descends into his ladderback chair
The static from the RCA Victor radio presses
Through the small Vermont home. “This is War!” a radio broadcaster yells.
The man glances at his wife, closes his eyes, and folds his hands
“God, please keep our lives from changing.”

A broad Russian soldier reaches for his
Cane resting by his desk.
He groans, and he tries to pull himself up.
He thrashes as he falls to the ground.
His frail mother runs into the room to find him
Running his fingers over the scar of his bullet-stricken leg.
“Oh, Milyi!” she cries,
“God, please keep my son’s fate from changing again!”

A German boy races through the streets of his small town.
He runs to the door of his Jewish friend’s house. He strikes the oak slab
As he yells “Hurry up David! We are going to be late!”
Silence greets him
As a gust of wind rushes up his back.
He opens the door and walks in the now-vacated home.
“David!” he cries.
He rests his hands on the coffee table covered
In glass shards. He holds up a shattered picture frame of David’s little sister,
Freida, lighting a candle on the menorah.
The boy departs from the abandoned home as
He begins to abandon the memories of his abducted friend.
He yells into the empty house,
“God, please keep this town from changing any more!”

A Czechoslovakian woman is crumpled in her bunk
Inside the barrack. Her ribs have become as easy to count as her toes.
Her scrawny and bloodless body
No longer matches the body that looked into her mirror just a few months prior.
Her heart longs to be cradled by her husband's voice.
"Get up you filthy animals!" an SS officer bellows.
She looks around her at the ghastly camp
People walking about like inanimate figures
"God, please keep our lives from changing for the worse."

A Dutch teenage boy carries his body
Through the snow-blanketed forest.
Men walk behind him like a sea of slaves;
Soldiers are hinged at every part of the human train. They are barking malicious words.
Men are dying every step of the way.
He trains his eyes ahead of him
Until he can't anymore. His father plunges to the ground.
"Father!" the boy cries.
He is shoved forward as the marching men
Trample the lingering sights of his beloved forebearer.
The pain piercing through his heart
Is stronger than the numbing in his limbs.
He whispers into the thin, icy air
"God, please stop changing my life, I don't have much left."

A feeble Polish girl crouches in a small cattle car. Her family surrounds her
As they watch her last moments on this earth.
The father caresses her forehead as the mother holds the girl's bony hands.
Her brother sobs into his older sister's arms, as she stands with a blank stare.
In her moment of desperation
The little girl uses her last breath to muster the words,
"God, please change my fate."

A World That's Broken

It doesn't take darkness
To recognize beauty

I used to come home from work
And find simple pleasures
In the quality of the weather
The warmth of a hot cup of coffee
The smile of my wife-

It didn't take her death,
For me to recognize her beauty
And it didn't take the grueling work of a concentration camp,
To prove me the leisure of my old job

When the light used to filter awkwardly
Through the wire of the fence
I had not the energy
nor the freedom
To admire its beauty
In the midst of my digging,
In the face of a firing squad

When the birds sung their melodies
In the days in which they did not avoid
The smokestacks of the camp,
The disorienting blur of exhaustion
Mutilated their tune
To an untranslatable commotion

When a crumb of bread
Appeared amongst the transparent soup,

I had not the strength to digest
Nor the hunger to ingest,
Such a rare luxury

I have not a revolutionary appreciation of the beauty of the world
- That is not a product of oppression
But a sympathy,
For fragility,
Of a world that's broken.

Joseph's Music

There is an observable optimism in the human condition- a pursuit of curiosity, of passion- that rarely leaves us, even in times of immense duress.

There was a music in the floorboards
A music in the creak,
Of the mangled planks
That I was too weary to hear
But Joseph used to rock back and forth along its edge
To prod it with his toe
And fantasize of melodies
Phantoms to my ear

My energies depleted
I only hoped for rest
His incessant creaking
Only put me in duress

Joseph, the musician
401, the jew on the bottom bunk
Had a special talent
A propensity to create
And though his hollow cheeks proved him to be as emaciated as the rest,
He never lost that gleam in his eye-
His passion put to the test

Friendly Kitchen Banter

It's perfectly neat, they deserve to die.
It was windy outside
The breeze jostled the shutters
A racket that dissatisfied
The empty streets
I sat with my head propped against my hand
- Infinitely bored

My mother bustled into the room
And set to work on a loaf of bread
“Why don't you play outside with your friends?”
I shifted uncomfortably
Stared at my chapped hands,
My best friend David had moved to a ghetto.

She sawed at her bread
The shutters and her knife,
An industrial commotion
It's perfectly neat, they deserve to die.

Her friend arrived around one,
A wicker basket clutched in her hands
“Did you hear about the jews?”
News of concentration camps reached us last night
I watched her, unfazed, working on a new loaf of bread,
While I sat glued to my spot at the table-
Grimacing as my mother replied,
“It's perfectly neat, they deserve to die.”

Miracle

The sky was swamped with a misty, grey haze that prevented all rays of golden light from seeping through. Even so, I gazed up into the abyss of gloom through the smudged glass, searching for the slightest glimpse of sunlight to no avail. Beneath me, the railroad trembled under the roaring train as I swayed with each minute bump. I couldn't shift my focus from the bare trees stripped of leaves, limp and lifeless, as they raced by in a rhythmic blur.

It's been seventy years since Auschwitz was liberated on January 27, 1945; today I return for the first time.

It's a place drenched in the blood of my brothers and sisters, yet the compulsion to visit and find closure has never left. Often, I feel as though I've never fully escaped; a piece of me will always be a part of Auschwitz. These past weeks I've spent my nights sleepless as thoughts buzzed sporadically through my head in a storm of emotions. Now, as the train continued barreling forward, I intently concentrated on my surroundings as a means of distraction. My eyelids became anchors that I no longer had the strength to lift, and the muffled voices of passengers sank into silence. I was cocooned in the aroma of pinewood and smoke that wafted through the air, bringing me back to 1942, a time I don't dare to forget.

There was an intense banging on our door that seemed to shake the entire house as if it were an earthquake. I glanced over at Mama, who had stopped washing the dishes and stood there, a pallid statue. She only broke from her stance to look back at Papa as he silently tip-toed down the stairs, followed by my four older sisters. I was only eight, but even I could see the panic that enveloped the room.

"You are to evacuate from your household immediately. Open up, or we will commence the search by force!" a deafening voice commanded.

There was a brief pause; no one moved an inch until the Nazi soldier began to pound on the door once more.

"This is your last chance!"

"Come here," Mama whispered as she held out her hands.

I leapt from behind the table with no hesitation, making sure to grab Aderes, my old, worn stuffed rabbit from the oak chair positioned across from where I had been sitting. I collapsed into Mama's arms and quivered in fear, unable to fully comprehend what was happening. What did the Nazi soldiers want with my family? We'd done nothing wrong.

Mama questioned Papa with a quaver in her voice. "What do we do, Levi? What about the boys? They're still at Aneta's."

"Don't worry, we'll find them. Let's just focus on this for now. I'll handle it," he replied, slowly approaching the door.

Everyone watched with anguish and anticipation as he turned the doorknob. With only a crack between the door and the jamb, the soldiers abruptly shoved their way into our home. Their dominating aura radiated throughout the room, making me feel helpless. I felt violated as their arrogant gazes pierced me. They wore malevolent smirks as they basked in our fear.

It wasn't long until we were positioned in a line outside the rows of houses. There must have been hundreds of us. I scanned the ground that was littered with debris and corpses of those who were defiant. The smell of burnt pinewood and smoke drifted through the air. People were being loaded into trucks and transported to a train station.

When we arrived, I spotted my two brothers with Aneta, a family friend, and her son Gabriel. They were positioned further up in the line where people were being herded into boxcars like cattle.

"Mama, I see Elijah and Noah. Look!" I said pointing in their direction.

"Good, go to them now mein engel. Take Moyra with you and tell them we're here, but be careful."

"No! I don't want to leave you!"

"It's okay, Nasya. Everything's going to be okay. It's just a check-up."

I wanted so desperately to believe her, but she couldn't mask the look of despair on her face well enough. My sister proceeded to take my hand, and we swiftly approached them, hiding behind the others in line as to not be spotted. However, when we reached them, we were separated by the soldiers and directed towards an already crowded boxcar.

"Where are we going? What are they doing, Moyra?"

"I don't know, but stay close!" she exclaimed with concern as she squeezed my hand.

I didn't even have the chance to reply as the Nazi soldiers began to push us and a horde of other people into the overflowing boxcar. I was overwhelmed with anxiety. Why were they putting us in a boxcar? Where were we going? I didn't want to leave home. I remained paralyzed and refused to budge as the world spun around me.

"Move it now! Schnell!" a Nazi's voice boomed as he began to prod me with the butt of his gun.

"Don't touch me!" I shrieked as a tsunami flooded my eyes.

"Nasya! Listen to him!" Moyra pleaded.

"MOVE!" The soldier demanded, now prodding me more forcefully.

"NO, PLEASE NO!" I screamed and gripped Aderes tightly.

"COME ON MOVE! WAKE UP!"

I awoke in a sudden burst. A tear rolled down my cheek. The humming of the train wheels and chattering of the passengers gradually became more apparent. Instinctively, I reached for my shoulder where the nightmare soldier had been jabbing me with his gun. Nothing. My rapid heartbeat began to dwindle, and slowly my fear dissipated. I slumped in my chair, relieved it was only a dream.

"Are you okay?" a tender voice asked.

I turned to find two inquisitive azure marbles observing me. A young girl now occupied the previously empty seat next to me. Her complexion was olive and her cheeks were still

sprinkled rosy red from the frigid winter air that had nipped at her face while she was waiting for the train. Her curly, almond hair reached just below her chin and bunched up into a ball of frizz.

“Young lady, you almost gave me a heart attack!” I exclaimed breathlessly.

“I’m sorry, I was only poking your shoulder to wake you. My grandmother taught me it

was impolite to point and poke, but you were mumbling, and I was worried,” she said with her finger still pointed at me.

“No need to worry. It was only a dream.”

“It must’ve been quite a dream then. Where are you going on such a dreary day?”

“I’ll be returning to Auschwitz for the first time since . . . well, for the first time in a long while.”

“Really, me too! My grandmother said it’s important to never let such places be forgotten, but what do you mean by returning? You’ve visited there before?” she questioned, her button nose crinkling as she stared at me, perplexed.

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say I was a visitor, more a prisoner,” I replied.

“Oh,” she said, at last, looking down at her miniature backpack as a silence overcame her.

I watched as she fidgeted with the zipper and sat there in a pool of uncertainty. She, like many others, didn’t know how to react to such a statement. I usually avoided talking about my experiences as a young child; the haunting nightmares were bad enough. However, she exuded a sense of familiarity. She couldn’t have been older than I was when my hometown of Czemierniki, Poland was raided, and in her presence, I oddly felt relieved. A part of me ached to see her feel wrongfully guilty over asking a simple question. It was as if she knew the traumatic distress that was associated with recalling such events. Nonetheless, I felt the compelling urge to comfort her.

“What’s your name,” I spoke, breaking the silence.

“Bina.”

“Well, Bina, let me tell you a story,”

“What story?” she said softly, looking up at me once more.

“Mine.”

. . .

Crowded was an understatement. My legs were numb, but it was impossible to sit or kneel; there was no room. I could feel the breath escape from the person behind me, and my shoulder jammed against a young man’s leg. I clung to Aderes, burying my nose deep in her back to weaken the stench emitting from the bucket that was our equivalent to a toilet. Aderes held the fragrance of Mama’s perfume. I remembered watching her by the mirror as the morning glow outlined her elegant figure, her silky, raven hair cascading down her back as she spritzed the subtle and sweet smell of cherry blossoms onto her neck. Then she reached under her bed and pulled out a hickory box engraved with the words *Mein Engel*. She sat down

on the bed, and for a moment she paused and ran her supple fingers over the words, tracing each letter.

“Come,” she finally said, patting a spot on the bed next to her.

I plopped down and glanced up at her, admiring her beauty. I watched as she observed the box one last time as if saying a final goodbye and then she placed it in my lap.

“This is for you.” She paused. “My mama gave this to me when I was younger, and now it’s yours.”

“What is it?”

“Open it,” she said tapping the top.

I unlatched the two tarnished gold clasps and eagerly lifted the lid. Inside, the box was lined with crimson red velvet and etched on the bottom of the lid was the name Aderes. An old stuffed rabbit lay in the box with its large, floppy ears covering its face. Its fur was light brown, and its nose was a pastel pink. Its right leg was ripped at a seam, and a navy blue patch was sewn on the left side of its stomach, but these flaws made it feel all the more personal. I lifted it out of the box and held it up as I admired each little detail.

“Aderes means protector. From now on, she will watch over you. She’s a reminder that I’ll always be with you, and no matter what, you’re strong enough to make it through anything. Always remember that, mein Engel.”

I just nodded, confused as to why she was gifting this to me now, but I didn’t linger on that thought for long.

“Hello, Aderes. My name is Nasya,” I shook its paw, “Let’s be good friends.”

The smell of vomit and excrement was too pungent. It felt like hours had passed, each second dragging on agonizingly. Passengers who had been sharply coughing without a single break for air had now stopped, and the whining of other children had ceased. The bucket in the corner had long since overflowed and spilled onto the floor. It was dehumanizing; I was an animal, caged and at the mercy of my own kind. By the third hour on the train, my mouth and throat ached for the slightest drop of water. My stomach was barren and I wished for even a bread crumb. Hour four, I got on my toes and peered through the slight crack in the boxcar. It was now early evening. In the distance, I could spot a camp. As we approached, on the ground, ditches were dug and filled with body parts and other remains.

I had heard Mama and Papa talking about the camps a few weeks ago. They were speaking in the kitchen late into the night. All my siblings were sound asleep, and I was supposed to be, but the intense milky light pouring through the window had kept me awake. My intention was never to eavesdrop, but when I heard the murmuring, my curiosity took control. I found myself balled up on the top stair with my back against the wooden railing. I tucked my legs under my cotton nightgown and perched my head on my knees as my wild, brown hair covered each side of my face like curtains. I sat just out of view from my parents, but they were so deeply focused on their conversation that I doubt they would have noticed me if I had crept up next to them.

“A town not far from ours was raided today,” Papa said hopelessly.

“I know,” Mama responded solemnly.

They shared a long silence as they gathered their thoughts.

“I spoke with Aneta today,” Mama said quietly. “Word’s getting around about what they do to us in there. They take us into the forest and shoot us dead. Hundreds of us; dead.”

There was another long pause.

“What are we supposed to do, Levi? Our kids . . .,” she gasped through tears.

“I don’t know, Chana. I don’t know.”

That night they wept, and I listened in deafening silence.

“ARBEIT MACHT FREI.” Work makes you free. I read the sign over and over and over again, lingering on each syllable until the train screeched to a stop. I thought we had escaped the dreadful fate others had met at death camps. We would have to work like slaves performing tedious tasks, but at least I would be able to see my family. If only I’d known there was no truth to any Nazi promises.

The heavy sliding door to the boxcar opened abruptly. I grabbed for my sister’s hand and clung to her like glue. As I peered through the wall of people, I managed to see the distinctive bright red of the swastika insignia wrapped around a guard’s arm. A throbbing pain pulsated throughout my head, and the ground rocked beneath me as I watched other passengers stagger from the train. I felt my hand being pulled forward and I followed the movement like a puppet on strings.

Red; all I saw was blood red. Each guard, a clone of the last. I turned back to see motionless bodies void of life being heaved off the train like rag dolls, their bodies now hollow shells. That could’ve been me, I thought. SS guards separated men from women and children. The cries of families in the throes of being torn apart tormented my eardrums. I covered one ear with my hand to drown out the cacophony of wails while the grasp Moyra had on my other hand tightened immensely. I struggled to hang on to Aderes as she was loosely positioned under my armpit. The consistent droning in my ears that begun on the train ride transpired into a faint ringing that seeped into the background as I frantically searched for Mama and my siblings. A plethora of people was still being unloaded from the trains and sorted into their designated lines. I spotted Mama and only two of my sisters as they piled off one of the boxcars and were engulfed by the swarm of detainees.

My third sister, Leah, never emerged from the train.

Moments later I was in an area of registration. A line approached a man dressed in a long, white coat with appraising eyes who only muttered one of two words: left or right, left or right. When my turn came, he scanned me up and down for only a second, but what felt like an eternity, and finally the word “left” escaped from his lips. Moyra shortly followed, joining me on the left. My mama and other sisters then stood before the strange man. I watched with uncertain dread as they moved to the right. The last glimpse I caught of my mother was of her sobbing; however, whether she was crying for herself or me, I was unsure. Maybe it was both.

I was a fragile porcelain doll. I was no longer human, but the property of another. Broken, shattered, and demoralized. I had no other purpose than to serve until I could serve no more; then, I was discarded and replaced. They cut the hair from my head. Every clump that dropped to the floor was another prayer unanswered. They stole my identity, my name now a sequence of numbers permanently imprinted on my left arm; and they stripped me of my dignity, my ambition, my worth.

I stared into the eyes of a guard and saw absolutely nothing. To him, I was a monotonous chore. To me, he was a stolid figure that didn’t so much as blink as I stripped; removing each

layer of clothing and joyous emotions until I had nothing but fear. Fear of not knowing what was to pour out of the showerheads and fear that I would die here not even knowing what for. I stared, petrified, at the wall in front of me. Inmates who had been here for longer told us of the gas emitted from the showerheads that would leave us begging for air. It was a gamble. I held my breath and closed my eyes as I waited. Then, a trickle of icy water ran over my eyelids and down across the point of my chin. I was going to live to see another day.

We were given a blue striped uniform to wear with two yellow triangles that formed the Star of David and assigned a barrack. Moyra and I were assigned to Barrack Eight. It was a narrow room with each wall covered in small bunk beds. I was still latched onto Aderes. A trusty had tried to rip her away from me as I entered the showers. I had sobbed, not because I was frightened, but because I had thought that the last piece of my mother was about to be stolen from me.

“Give it to me,” a trusty demanded, attempting to pry it from my arms.

I gripped onto Aderes, refusing to budge. They weren’t going to rid me of this too.

“What’s going on over there,” a guard questioned sternly, walking towards us.

“Sir! She won’t give up her rabbit,” the trusty stammered.

He looked me up and down, and scoffed.

“That wretched thing! She can keep it,” the guard laughed, waltzing off.

We were awoken at 4:00 AM each morning and given half an hour to use the toilet, get dressed, make our beds, and have breakfast. Washing facilities were shared among two thousand prisoners and usually contained little to no toilet paper and dirty water. The guards then held roll call. Each day the numbers dwindled as many fell ill and died during the night. We would be counted twice, and any inconsistencies meant we would be counted again. Those who had then gone missing or collapsed were beaten, tortured, or executed. I watched as two thousand turned to one thousand.

Inmates that roamed the grounds were nothing but skin wrapped around bone. Everyone worked endlessly from morning to night producing synthetic rubber for a plant owned by IG Farben, and food intake was rationed, so all we got were scraps. I went to bed each night not knowing if I’d wake up, which I soon came to accept. Moyra was all I had left. I hadn’t seen a trace of my papa or my brothers. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were lying perished in a mountain of bodies ready to be disintegrated at the crematorium. Passing by it each day, the suffocating smell of burnt flesh stung my nose. I was desensitized to such horrors. After all, staring death in the face was a daily occurrence. One wrong step and he would suck you in.

One night Moyra curled up behind me in my tiny, creaky bunk bed. In the distance, the heaving of detainees echoed through eerily still darkness. The moonlight couldn’t reach us here. She tenderly played with my hair, pulling it away from my face as she sweetly sang a lullaby. Her warmth engulfing me as I held Aderes against my chest.

“Numi, numi yaldati,

Numi, numi, nim.

Numi, numi k’tanati,*

Numi, numi, nim.

Mommy's gone to work -
She went, Mommy went.
She'll return when the moon comes out -
She'll bring you a present!

Numi, numi...

Sleep, sleep..." She quietly sang as her voice grew silent.

I awakened to the sound of sirens resonating throughout the camp. A multitude of guards stormed into the barrack, grabbing inmates from their beds. I sat up and pressed myself against the wall, feeling the cold seeping through the wood on my back. Moyra was no longer in my bed.

My mind raced as the guards continued to rip weak bodies from their beds. The screams were almost as loud as the blaring sirens. Then just as soon as they came, they left. I shot out from my bed and looked in the direction of Moyra's bunk, only to find her lying there sound asleep, so fatigued.

"I can't lose you, too," I whispered to myself.

Two years later. January 27th, 1945; 15:00.

The Germans ordered that Auschwitz be abandoned. Why; I don't know. All around me buildings were being blown up, torn down, and set ablaze. Records were being shredded and Nazi guards were gathering inmates. Amongst the chaos, Moyra told me to run. However, I didn't want to obey her. I couldn't abandon her.

"Nasya, go! You have to go. I'll make sure they won't get you," she urged me.

"No, I can't... I can't. I won't," I stammered.

She grabbed onto my shoulders and squeezed. It was with the intent to comfort me, but I found it terrifying. It felt too much like a goodbye. She locked eyes with mine, and her usually bright, azure eyes were now dull and rimmed with tears. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Finally, she said, "I love you."

I didn't say anything. I knew if I did, it would make it all real, so I just stared at her through the oceans blurring my vision. At last, she turned to leave.

"Wait! Take this," I yelled, holding out Aderes.

"I can't! No way!"

"Yes. She'll protect you as she did with me. You'll take it and you'll return it to me when we see each other again," I said, shoving Aderes into her arms.

And with that, she was gone, and I ran until my lungs were fire and my legs were rubber.

. . .

“What happened next,” Bina enthusiastically questioned.

“I was saved,” I replied. “After that, I was lost. Auschwitz had been all I had known for three years; it was home, and now I was free with nowhere to go. I expected I would die, but I had unexpectedly lived. I was dispersed in a sea of refugees trying to find any of my relatives, but I was the last survivor. From my village, only ten lived.”

She stayed quiet, absorbing every word.

“Well,” she said, “Did you ever get your bunny back?”

“No, I’m afraid not.” I sighed, tears threatening to fall.

“If it makes you feel better, you could have mine.”

She unzipped her maroon backpack and pulled out a ragged, old bunny rabbit with a navy blue patch on its left side and a ripped seam on its right leg.

“This is Aderes,” she chimed.

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The Ride

I've taken many train rides in my life. Train rides to Bunică's house in the country on the lake or train rides to visit Mama's old friends outside of Vienna. Those trains had red velvet seats that smelled of new cloth and heavy perfume. The arm rests were a glossy, polished wood. They had big windows that allowed a scenic view of the beautiful green plains of Hungary as you passed by.

This train isn't like that.

We stand on this train in little huddles, Mama, Emalia, and I together, similar to other families on the train. This train is made of old wood and there are no big windows. This train smells like rotting wood and grief. There are perhaps seven small cracks through which you can peek to see the plains outside. And if you really try, you can smell the turned soil from outside along with the scent of decaying wood. The people on this train aren't smiling and the air is heavy, heavy with fear and sadness. No, this train is very different.

I want to ask where we are going, but Mama told us she doesn't want questions right now. Three days ago, we woke up and just got on the train with nothing. But that's okay. I like to think we are going home. Back to the old life that we lived happily three years ago. Three years ago those men hadn't killed Papa, hadn't taken everything, hadn't destroyed life. No, life was simple then. The days when we were allowed to be Roma, and not have to suffer and question everything but nothing. The days when we lived in our beautiful brick apartment building in Budapest. When we lived on the third floor, apartment 11, and every day Papa would always tell us we had the best view of the city from our windows. When Emalia and I shared a room, painted a fair pink, with two matching beds and faded blue sheets. We both had trunks at the foot of our beds, full of colorful skirts, beautiful blouses, Bunică's old scarfs and the most valuable possessions. When our kitchen always smelled of black coffee and desserts made with sugary ingredients discovered in the cupboards. I remember walking to school, past the corner bakery that handed out free kifles to children on Sundays and past the shoe store owned by Mr. and Mrs. Katz. Yes, home would be nice to go to. Home.

That's when my life felt full. Now with every passing month of uncertainty, the color has been drained from the world. Family gave us greens, love gave us reds, freedom gave us blues and happiness gave us a rainbow. Now there is no happiness, no freedom. Every color of the spectrum has been taken from us; now the evil ones are painting over and over again with black. A black that absorbs all love, all happiness.

Emalia leans her shoulder on me and with a sigh asks, "Where are we going?"

I don't take my gaze off the hole in the warped wood. "Back home, I think. Mama hasn't said."

She tilts her head up, her green eyes staring wide at me. Her face has become more slender these past few years, giving her a more mature look. "I hope we're going home." After a few seconds pass she speaks again. "This is a long train ride, Keja."

"Yes, I know."

"How long has it been?" Emalia asks curiously.

"Almost four days, Loves," Mama interrupts as she moves next to us.

"I didn't think our house in the ghetto was that far from home," I muttered.

I think Mama has heard me, because she looks at me, her eyes heavy with heartache. She walks over and lovingly wraps her arms around Emalia and me.

“You two are my everything. *Me mangav tut.”

The train comes to a slow stop, the wheels creaking underneath. I hold Mama’s hand tightly, so tightly that I could hold onto her forever. Two men, dressed just like the ones who took us away, open the heavy wood doors from the outside. Light pours into the car, though dim from the clouds covering the sky. The men shout angry words at everyone, words I don’t understand. Still grasping Mama’s hand in front of me, we exit the train, single file, onto a small platform. Shouting, accompanied by crying and screaming, fills the damp, heavy air as we exit the cars. Big guns, the size of a small child, are carried by brute evil men. I can tell that these men like order. Any time a man, woman or child steps out of the line, the men shout and prod them with their big guns. I jump down from the platform to feel my matte black shoes sink into the mud path. Hours go by, it feels, hours of standing and waiting. Waiting for something.

I poke my head out of the line to see up ahead the line being split into two. Above them hangs a metal sign. The sprawling metal forms a strange pattern of letters. The words that are hung over bad places. That’s what Mama once said to us. Words that are false. The words...

“Work sets you free.”

“No.” I whisper. “Not here.” I turn around. The line of people, statues even, stretch for what seems like miles and the loading station is out of view.

My feet know what I’m doing before my head. I jump out of line, turn around and walk. “No.” I say. “Not here, just not here” Now I’m running. Faster and faster. Towards the cattle cars, towards the sign, towards the platform where I first realized my circumstances. Just away. With each stride, “No” fits in rhythmically. I’m sprinting now. Hot tears roll down my face. “NO!” I scream. People around me stare with wide eyes and open mouths. I almost reach the

* Romani for “I love you”

platform when I am tackled to the ground. Two Nazis fall on top of me as I squirm and kick and scream. I can’t breathe anymore. My cold gasps stab my lungs like a dagger. “NOOOOO, STOP NO!” My arms are held behind me and, try as I might, I can’t break free from the officer’s grip. Unable to move I sink to the ground, on my knees, hot tears sting my red cheeks along with the wind whipping past. “No.” I whisper as I’m being pulled back. Back to Auschwitz, back towards my death, back into the black.

“No.”

#132238

January 27th, 1945.

I gave an unpleasant gaze at the rotted barracks where I had spent fifteen brutal weeks. My feet were cemented in the mud as I stared at the rusted electric fence that had held 1.3 million Jews, Poles, Romani, and Soviet prisoners of war.

The sky rumbled and hissed as the liberating Soviet Army approached Auschwitz Concentration Camp, now approximately 200 yards away. Rain slapped against my ghost white skin and saturated the blue and white stripes of my dingy uniform. I slowly trudged my way to the crowd of Jews, desperate and ready for release. Each step shot pain into every joint and muscle. My ribcage, cheeks, knees - all of my bones were now pronounced. My 14-year-old body had never looked or felt this frail.

There were only a few thousand of us “outcasts” left and there was no food, no water, and no medical care. Many Jews, Poles, Romani, and Soviet prisoners forgot who we truly were physically and mentally. The evil ones just left us behind to die.

The Red Army had marched their way to the entrance of the complex and was greeted by the baffled prisoners. The first soldiers were dumbfounded when they witnessed our conditions.

“What is that over there?” questioned a Soviet, pointing north.

“Another concentration camp,” I declared.

“And beyond that?”

“Also a camp.”

“And what is behind it?”

“The crematoria. We don’t know what is past that point.”

The officer’s face turned perplexed.

The troops suspiciously wandered further into Auschwitz. The path they walked on was dotted with human remains and dusted with ashes. Body parts were scattered around crematoria pits after the SS demolished the cemetery. The Schutzstaffel thought they destroyed all the evidence, but shoes, dishes, suitcases, and human hair were discovered in storerooms.

As I proceeded to the main gate, I saw that field hospitals had already been established on site. Red Cross workers assisted in the recovery of captives that suffered from bedsores, frostbite, and typhus. The staff tried their best to give medical care and clothing to survivors. When I was just about to reach the exit, the scent of golden toast and orange juice pleasantly scented the air. I made my way to one of the tents where a group of teenage boys stood. A young lady, probably in her early twenties, sat in a chair with medical supplies and food. Real, edible food.

“Hello! My name is Ms. Kimmy! Are you hurt? Do you need any assistance?”

“Just hungrier than ever,” I replied.

“What is your name and given number?”

“Joseph Geller, 132238.”

Ms. Kimmy had peroxide blonde hair whose locks dripped over her shoulder. Her cherry lips and ice blue eyes glistened even in the storm above. She had a comforting smile that washed away my misery. The nurse handed me crisp toast and juice. My taste buds danced with happiness.

“Let them be free!” boomed a Soviet officer.

Moments later, chants of “We are liberated! We are free!” filled the air. The camp roared (at least as much as a group of very sick people could roar) with celebration. These were the words I had been dreaming to say and hear since being captured almost four months ago.

Thoughts of my family immediately raced through my mind. Where were they? Were they sick? Had they been relocated? Would I ever speak to them again? And the worst thought of them all - had they been killed? I was drowning in anxiety.

An image of my mother, Martha, flashed in my head. She had thick, curly, taffy- brown hair with eyes the color of fresh chestnuts. The softness of her alabaster skin matched the gentleness of her soul. Then a picture of David, my father, with his hazel buzz cut and tawny-

colored eyes, his skin bronzed from a life of working outdoors. Next, my sister, Ayda, almost a clone of my mother. Ayda, seventeen, was larger than life and beyond gregarious.

I, and a puny group of other Jews, trickled out of the camp on two legs. We all feared that the Germans would return and make their next murderous move. I spun around to study the last horrid sights of Auschwitz. The site looked like it came from a horror scene. The barracks were fully evacuated and examined by the Soviet Army. The network of camps stood half-destroyed as well with the gas chambers. Ahead of me was the metal arch that read; "Arbeit macht frei". Work sets you free. Only the opposite was true.

"We have done it, men. We won the brutal battle," announced a man beside me.

"Next stop... Oświęcim train station," declared another voice from the front of the pack. "I used to ride that train day to night with my Momma. It's only a little less than two miles from here."

Bit by bit we steadily made our way to Oświęcim. An intense mixture of feelings - elation, dread, sorrow - spread like wildfire from my heels to my torso. I shivered in my ragged shoes in the January rain while my stomach growled. There was suddenly an unpleasant thud on the gravel from behind. One of our fellow survivors had dropped. Dead. I couldn't give up now. I fought for four months and the hope of reunion was still etched in my heart.

We approached the train station as lines of exiting Jews, Poles, Romani, and Soviet prisoners filled the cars. We tagged along with them. The train ride was the first leg of a 700-plus mile journey from Auschwitz to my home of Amsterdam, a trek made up of not only train rides, but long miles on foot, and hitchhiking from the help of sympathetic citizens.

While traveling, all I could ponder was one thing.... Vondelpark. My family and I spent our last days of freedom there enjoying the roses that were lined along the vast green blanket of grass and the ducks that swam gracefully in the ponds. This park was the most visited park in Amsterdam and I'd been going there ever since I could walk. Musicians would perform magical songs while Adya and I smothered our taste buds with ice cream. The day before we were apprehended, my father called us all together at our favorite bench in the park.

"Martha, Ayda, Joseph.... I know it is beyond devastating to think about, but there may be a time in life where we all get split. It could be today, tomorrow, or weeks from now, but I strongly think that we need to keep an infinite promise to each other. If we happen to return, every Sunday at 7:00 p.m., attempt to meet at Vondelpark. Specifically, meet right here where we are now at the "Geller" bench where we usually attend family picnics. I know this is hard for you to hear, but it is what we have to do to keep us united. Kids, Martha, never let go of hope and stay committed."

Chickens clucked and cackled in the royal blue crates that I rested on. My callused feet dangled off the side of the teal, rusted truck, my final ride to Amsterdam, courtesy of a kind poultry farmer. Amsterdam had never looked so awe-striking with the sky painted peach. I only had a few miles left to go. Out of the many days, weeks, and months of my journey, my mental and physical health increased, and seeing my home gave me another boost.

At last, my feet hit the city ground and a welcoming, familiar, sweet aroma of baked bread wafted through the air. The houses that lined the canal looked like colorful dominos stacked one beside another. The lights, a galaxy of stars, led me into central Amsterdam. It was about 6:00 pm and the city was still wide awake. Hope clung to me more than ever as I passed memory lane. My eyes filled with tears and my heart was torn with bittersweet memories. It felt like it was just yesterday when I was holding my mother's hand, stopping at the local bakery to grab a free, warm, chocolate cookies.

Once again, Red Cross workers were stationed at the main part of the city. They provided shelter to survivors that were homeless, including myself. Dozens of tents were erected and filled with wool blankets and cots. Various food items were offered as our nourishment. A mob of Jews gathered around several papers tacked to a post. Heartbroken expressions framed their faces as they examined the death list. I joined them, scanning the list, holding my breath with my fingers crossed. My eyes fearfully checked the names, searching for the initial of our last name, G. I stopped. My finger dragged through Gallegher, Gambell, Gearing, Gelbard. Geller. Martha Geller, David Geller.

My knees gave way and I dropped to the ground. A deep depression rushed over my whole body. It felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest. I clenched my fists as I pounded the stone street. The first tear broke out; the rest followed in an unbroken stream.

Ayda. I needed to find Ayda. Vondelpark. I needed to go to Vondelpark. It was about a quarter past 6, and even better, it was a Sunday. High hopes once again skyrocketed. I knew my parents were gone but, my sister may still be alive. She must be alive.

As I hustled to Vondel, familiar faces of citizens blurred passed met. The wind howled and elm trees swayed in the sunset. My feet slapped the pavement below faster than ever as I attempted to reach the landmark before the appointed time. Finally, I could hear the romantic tunes from the open-air theatre. I then crossed the obsidian gate with the giant golden letters that read Vondelpark. My second home. The gust of air carried the sweet smell of flowers into my direction while I set out to the Geller bench, the bench where we spent our days enjoying picnics was still carved with each member of our family's initials. My throbbing legs at long last relaxed. I rested. Now I just had to wait.

Time eventually swallowed ten minutes, twenty-five, fifty, then sixty. My soul plummeted. I let out a bitter, disappointed sigh as the sky filled with darkness. An hour and a half went by and the crowds of visitors disappeared. Two hours. 9:00 pm... the park closing time. I know I had to go back to the refugee area, but I will not give up my goal of finding Ayda.

I came back the next week. No Ayda. And the following week, no. The week after that, the weeks after that, still no Ayda. Months turned into years and years turned into decades and still every Sunday I would make the trip to our favorite family bench, through the years working for the grocer, and the years I owned my own butcher shop, and through my wonderful years of marriage with my wife, Christy. Every Sunday afternoon I would enter the park with hope, and every evening I would return with disappointment.

Now sixty years have passed and I still make the trip every Sunday at 7:00 pm to Vondelpark, now trudging alone with a cane. My hair used to be a penny brown; now it's solid silver. Each visit I have made added another strand of gray, it seems. I long for the feeling of my sister's hand placed on my shoulder and turning to see her with a smile from ear to ear. I wish to hear her soothing voice say softly, "We did it Joseph! Together we survived!"

I can still hope.

The Document of a Camp Guard

Herzlich Willkommen

Please fill in the template every report with your signature.

Prisoner Log, Month 1

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 22

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: June 13, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

Day one in Janinagrube. Currently 877 living occupants, almost 100 arrived today. Two French men rebelled by refusing to come out to mine coal, prisoners (NUMBER REDACTED) and (NUMBER REDACTED). They've been dealt with. Otherwise, an uneventful day.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 2

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 22

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: July 14, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

It's been a busy month. Many prisoners have died of fatigue and hunger, at least fifteen. With that being said, we need a new batch of rations.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 3

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 22

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: August 10, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

I won't be sending this report up, but I need somewhere to speak of this. It's shameful, but I favor some of the prisoners in this place. For example, Ada. I know we should use the numbers, but I know her name and I'll use it. She's an Austrian girl, sweet and soft-spoken, probably around thirteen or fourteen. I don't get to see much of her, but I talk to her during some of her work and lunchtime. I try to stay professional with her, but she knows I find her enjoyable to be around. I should be angry that she has some individuality in a place where standing out gets you killed. But I can't force myself to lose my temper about her. She's like a daughter to me. And today, she almost died. She was lugging around coal, and collapsed. I saw the light in her eyes, the light that made her different, dull. She barely forced herself back up. And as this happened, everyone kept walking. The guards continued their protocol. Not even the other prisoners batted an eye. It made me mad. I wanted to scream, "Where is your empathy? Have you gone mad? A girl has collapsed to the ground, weak and cold, and nobody acknowledges her presence?"

I feel like I've snapped and woken up from a dream where I reigned above everyone else and now am seeing how lowly I truly am. I'm conflicted and afraid.

Prisoner Log, Month 4

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: September 7, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

20 or so deaths by fatigue in the past two months, but many arrivals. Prisoner Ada 743008 came close to death but pushed through. She's a good one to keep around. Hopefully.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 5

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: October 4, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

Another report I'll fail to send in, but there is nowhere else to speak of this safely.

How could I have not realized before? How have I not realized how sick it is what I'm doing? To myself, to other people, to every person in captivity? I stare at these rotting people, children, and can do nothing for them. After Ada almost passed, every death I have to report hurts a little bit more. I didn't see any of the prisoners as human before; reporting their deaths was a trifling task. If I had one wish, I would go back to myself about to sign those papers to work here and say, "Put that pen down, and realize what horrible crimes you'll commit if you go through with this." I've never hated a version of myself more. It just shows how fear can blind a person, and how it still blinds me, because I have the gall to watch people die and do nothing. That's the base of the whole thing. Fear. Make the captured fear escape or rebellion and make them think there is no escape. Make those on your side fear the consequences of leaving it so they promise, no, plead, loyalty. They grab Death from behind and tie strings to it; make it their puppet, and perform for an audience who claps and smiles out of fear of what will happen if they show any disdain. They have the power to decide who is invited to the show, who becomes a volunteer on stage, and who will never be seen again after they volunteer. And as long as Hitler reigns, I will be forced into this vicious cycle of smiling, clapping, and killing, where I help produce the play.

Prisoner Log, Month 6

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: November 24, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

Several prisoners have tried to rebel or escape in the past few days. I couldn't tell you why they chose now.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 7

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: December 20, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

It's come to light why those prisoners were trying to escape now. Word has been going around that the Red Army is coming to strike us down. We won't let them, and we'll try our best to keep our camp safe.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 7

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: December 20, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

They know we won't win. And frankly, I don't want us to.

Prisoner Log, Month 7

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Janinagrube (Libiąż)

Location Founded: 1943

Date: December 20, 1944

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

My apologies for the second report in a month, but we're manning a complete evacuation of camp Janinagrube due to the Red Army approaching to liberate Auschwitz. Almost a thousand prisoners have been sent to Birkenau or Monowitz as unfit for work, so the evacuation will not be too rigorous. Some of the prisoners will be transported by train from Gliwice to the Mauthausen and Buchenwald camps, while the others will be walking to the Gross-Rosen camp in lower Silesia. I will be mandating the Gross-Rosen walk. I will keep as many updates as I can.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 8

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia)

Location Founded: 1940

Date: January 17, 1945

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

They left her. They left Ada behind. They said she was too weak to march with us, with these cowards who flee from their consequences while pretending they still reign on high. They will pay, and so will I. I deserve punishment as much as these sick men, laughing at the suffering of others while drowning in champagne and phony power. I deserve punishment because I went along with their games. The worst part is I can't go help her, or I will die at the hands of those who once praised me. Treason, they call it. Empathy is what it is. I know my end is near, whether it be by my employers or the 'enemy'. I just hope they find Ada alive and well. I know she won't worry about me after I'm gone. I didn't help her; she doesn't know that I cared. And now she never will.

Prisoner Log, Month 8

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia)

Location Founded: 1940

Date: January 17, 1945

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

Made it to Gross-Rosen. We left behind 60 prisoners at Janinagrube. The SS men said they were too weak to march. The camp's good as abandoned now.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 8

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia)

Location Founded: 1940

Date: January 17, 1945

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

Camp Janinagrube has been liberated. We're close to becoming a target.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 8

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia)

Location Founded: 1940

Date: January 17, 1945

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

Ada's in the camp still. I hope she isn't hurt. The Red Army found her. They must have. They have to help.

Prisoner Log, Month 9

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia)

Location Founded: 1940

Date: February 10, 1945

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

The Red Army will arrive soon, we have little time left. We will try to keep our troops safe and away from the Army.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 9

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia)

Location Founded: 1940

Date: February 12, 1945

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

I can't say I'm surprised, but the cowards are blazing and blowing up any evidence of their wrongdoing. The crematories have been blown to smithereens; bodies have all been burnt. The Red Army will be here by daylight tomorrow. I know they mean well, but liberation is a dangerous game, and blood of both the pure and the poisoned will shed. And if this is where I meet my end, I'll meet it with a clear conscience, helping the innocent people I once hurt stay alive and away from stray bullets.

Prisoner Log, Month 9

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia)

Location Founded: 1940

Date: February 13, 1945

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

They're here. Wish me luck.

-Adalrich Jäger

Prisoner Log, Month 9

Name: Adalrich Jäger

Occupation: Camp Guard

Age: 23

Location: Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia)

Location Founded: 1940

Date: February 13, 1945

Submit reports at the end of the month. Reports are not mandatory unless something eventful has happened.

I'm... alive. The camp was liberated. The SS men are under arrest or dead. And I'm free. The Red Army took pity on me because of my youth; they let me go and I'm free. I can go back home to my family safely and live life without fear. Soon, I won't have to answer to the Nazis, to Hitler, to anyone. And I don't need to document my fear ever again.

It's been a while, hasn't it? I finally found these old papers of mine. Reading through them is so surreal. I was such a panicked child back then. But enough about him, I guess I should finish my story now.

It's been three years since the war passed. Hitler died, there was rejoicing, and people slowly but surely settled back into their normal lives, as I did my part. I became a cook for the nearest orphanage, and that is where my life changed. I met the most beautiful girl, Bernadette. We soon got together, and last year, I proposed to her and we got married. She makes me so happy every day, but there is one thought in the back of my head that intrigues me: "Where is Ada?" Yes, I haven't found her yet, and I know I probably never will. Wherever she is, is better than that cold place. I hope she's doing well. I hope she's healthy and smiling.

I had my first daughter last week. She's the light of my life.

Her name is Ada.

Farewell, old friend.

-Adalrich Jäger.

The Escape

The train jolted forward and began its three-hour journey to Koldichevo. Ethan Kanievsky glanced out the window, its glass pane a speedway for the rain that dashed across it.

“Why are we doing this, again?” asked Simon, Ethan’s six-year-old son.

“It’s important to me that you see this place,” answered Ethan. “Some really bad people did some really bad things at Koldichevo. We need to remind ourselves of their mistakes, so that we never make them again.”

“What happened?” Simon enquired.

For a long moment, a distant look filled Ethan’s eyes. Finally, he began.

* * *

It was 1944. Ethan was only 16 years old. He had been in the grim labor camp for just five weeks, but already his spirits had been crushed. Looking at his lunch--a meager one piece of bread and some watery vegetable soup--he wondered what his life could have been had he never been placed in the camp.

“Hey--Ethan,” a voice murmured.

“Yeah, Jared?” Ethan responded. Jared Caplan was Ethan’s best friend at the camp. He had met him three weeks back, when Jared first arrived at his barracks. He had somehow kept a fair bit of courage and hope, despite the best efforts of the SS-TV agents stationed there.

“There’s been some talk, and--” He paused, looking around discretely to make sure no one else was listening. “Shlomo Kushnir and some other prisoners are planning to break out.”

“What? That’s suicide,” whispered Ethan harshly. “They’ll die for sure, and once their little escape is over, we’ll all be punished for it.” Shlomo Kushnir was a member of their barracks. It didn’t matter if Ethan participated or not; if they failed, the whole barracks--maybe the whole camp--would share their fate.

“Ethan, do you want to spend the rest of your life in this place? This could be the chance we’ve been waiting for.”

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by fellow prisoner Eli Frisch, who had just walked over to them.

“What are you fellows talking about?”

Eli had been one of the first to give in to the cruel dehumanization enforced by the Nazis. He had determined that they would never be freed, and thought it best to make his experience as painless as possible, with little regard to his fellow comrades. There was no way he was going to go along with breaking out, and he would certainly betray them if they told him. Best not to risk him overhearing anything; he and Jared would wait to talk about this proposed escape further.

“Nothing.” Quickly changing the subject, Ethan asked, “Did you hear what happened to Yonatan?”

“Yes, a real shame; from what little of him I’d encountered, he seemed like a nice guy. But that’s what happens when you try to steal more food than you’re given.”

Absently, Eli turned his head to look around. Ethan turned to Jared and nodded. He wasn't going to end up like Yonatan, or anyone else of the countless that had been lost to Koldichevo, to any of the camps, to the Nazis. He had suffered long enough. He was getting out.

* * *

Another grueling day passed, and it was finally time to go to sleep. As Ethan flopped down on his uncomfortable straw mattress, he closed his eyes and began to drift off.

"Ethan," Jared whispered, leaning down over the top of the bunk bed they shared.

"What?" Ethan hissed back. Could he not have any time to relax?

"Did you think we were just going to wing our escape? We have to prepare, to practice."

"Practice what? Running? I can do that just fine."

"Crawling and creeping around. If we make one sound, we're through."

Fair enough, Ethan thought. And so for the next few days, once everyone else had fallen asleep, everyone in their barracks would practice sneaking around. Tip-toeing around on two feet was easy enough, but silently crawling was somewhat challenging. Ethan had never noticed how loud everything he did was until it was dead silent. Every breath, every rustle of his clothes, seemed to echo off every wall and surface for miles. He felt that at any moment he might wake another captive, or worse, alert a guard. But the fear of getting caught gave him focus, and he persisted as cautiously and quietly as he could muster.

It was a relief when he finally got the hang of it. He felt that he was ready to get on with the mission, but some questions still remained unanswered. Chiefly, how they were actually going to break out.

"You never really told me what the plan was, did you?" asked Ethan.

"No, I guess I didn't." replied Jared. "We're planning to break out on the 17th, in three days."

Three days?! Freedom was so close he felt he could touch it. Three days, and he would be free of this horror. Three days, and he could begin to live, to be free to do as he pleased. Three days, and he could see the world.

"As you can tell, they've almost breached the barracks wall," continued Jared, pointing to the thin, chipped wall from which a cool draft blew. "They should be done by the 17th. Midnight that night, they'll distribute cloth, sewing supplies, and knives. We're to sew the cloth onto our shoes while we wait for them to finish with the wall, and the knives will be used for defense."

"Wait, we don't all get guns?" asked Ethan, surprised. "What are we going to do if they start shooting at us?"

"We have two guns, and--"

"Two?! They have an army of guards, and we have two guns?"

"And four grenades, plus a small bit of acid," finished Jared. "Those were hard enough to get as it is. In case you haven't noticed, it's a little difficult to smuggle anything into a labor camp filled with Nazis, let alone weapons. We're lucky we're all getting knives. You need to learn to think before you speak."

"Sorry, sorry, you're right." Ethan apologized. "I guess I'm just stressed."

“Whatever it is, make sure you’ve got it under control by the 17th. We’ve got to work together if we’re going to get out of here.” replied Jared. Ethan nodded. What he said was absolutely true: he needed to calm down and trust in what his friend said; to acknowledge that he didn’t know everything that was going on, and that Jared and the others must have reasons for whatever they’re doing.

“I will,” Ethan assured him.

“Good. That’s enough practice for tonight. We’d better get some sleep.”

* * *

It was time. The three days had trudged by at a painstakingly slow pace, but it would all be worth it in a few short hours. As he finished sewing the cloth to his shoes, Ethan mentally prepared himself for the task ahead. Right now, the watchdogs would have been poisoned and most of the guards would be asleep or distracted. Everything was in place; everyone was ready.

He rose, collecting his knife and taking a look at Jared, who had finished slightly before him. Jared nodded, and they gathered around everyone else already positioned at the wall. It was raining outside, which was perfect for their situation: almost any noise they made would be covered by the storm. It seemed that they were the last to complete the task, for not even ten seconds after, the wall had been breached, and a small stream of prisoners was trickling through.

“Once we’re clear of the fence, follow me.” whispered Jared, almost mouthing the words. “We’re to meet up with the Bellorussian partisans. They’ll help us.”

They slipped through the wall and into the cold, dark night. Even with the rain, every step he took felt like the thunderclaps overhead. He found comfort in remembering the cloth attached to his shoes, and the knife he clenched in a white-knuckled grip.

They arrived at the electric fence, and two prisoners stepped forward with tools to cut through it. Once they did so, the alarm would sound, and they would have a moment’s head start before the guards ran out to chase them. Ethan took a moment to quiet his mind and focus on the one thing standing between him and freedom: the ability to run fast enough.

Snap. Snap. Snap. He could feel his pulse quickening with every cut made to the fence. Snap. Snap. Snap. Then, suddenly, the blaring alarm.

“Go, go, go!” cried what Ethan assumed to be the leader of this whole operation, Shlomo Kushnir. He didn’t need to be told twice! Already, he could hear the guards fleeing from their posts. Three people in front of him. Two. One. Go!

He took off into the night, feet pounding against the dirt. He could see Jared in front of him, the smile on his face. They were free! And after they met up with the partisans, after this whole awful war was over, he could finally choose his path. He could finally live again.

* * *

Simon’s eyes were filled with awe as Ethan finished his story. Smiling sadly, Ethan reached out to place a hand on his small arm.

“I know my story ended well,” said Ethan, “But a lot of others’ were not so fortunate. This is why we’re here, on this train. We must remember those whose stories ended in pain, in sadness, in order to pay them respect.”

“I’ll make sure they aren’t forgotten, Dad.” said Simon.

Their train shook to a stop, and Ethan glanced out of the window, the station bathed in a warm yellow light. He remembered the time when we believed he had no chance of a good life, and reassured that young man that it was all going to turn out fine. He had a beautiful family, and every day appreciated that which he was lucky enough to have. He had but one thing to thank for that: trust. Trust in his friends. Trust in God. Trust that one day, somehow, he would persevere. Trust was what had saved him.

Shattered

I bolt awake to the piercing crash of shattering glass. The blanket on my bed falls away, leaving me cold and shaky. Gunshots sound, and I hear screaming. What is going on? I rush into my seven year old brother's room. He is sound asleep, and for a moment, I don't want to wake him, but I have to.

It is 1939, Germany, and I am a Jew. The fact that I can say those words means my life may be in peril. Hate and fear of Jews has been sizzling under the surface of my country, steadily rising. I knew that it was only a matter of time until we had an explosion on our hands.

"Benjamin!" No answer. I slap him. "Wach auf, du kleiner kacke !"

"Hey! I was having a wonderful dream." I roll my eyes. Classic Benjamin, always dreaming. I hope his innocence isn't ruined tonight.

"We must go. I hear gunshots. I believe it is the Nazis, and if I am correct, we are not safe here any longer."

"What? but --"

"No buts. We need to go now"

Why does this have to happen tonight? Mama and papa finally trusted me to take care of Benjamin so they could find a place for us to move: a place where our friends wouldn't shun us, and where we would not have to wear yellow Stars of David on our shirts to show that we are Jewish. I suppose all of the anti-semitism in Germany has caught up to us. It's dangerous for my family to live here, and these events are just proving that even more.

I decide I will take Benjamin away from our house. We will figure something out. Then it strikes me: the idea that will save our lives.

Before Hitler came to power, I was dear friends with a girl named Anne Marie. Her parents, however, are in the Nazi party, and once Hitler started spewing all of the silly nonsense about Jews, they pulled us away from each other. I haven't spoken to Anne Marie in over two years, but she is my only hope. I kneel down to Ben's eye level and say,

"Hörst du kleine bruder . It is imperative you listen to everything that I say." He nodded his head. "You know of the wicked people, the Nazis, who think that because we believe in Moses and celebrate Hanukkah, we do not deserve to be treated right?"

"Ja schwester ."

"These people are after us tonight, and we must escape them; so follow me and be very quiet."

"Stille wie ein maus. Das verspreche ich ."

Slipping out the door, the smell of death, hate, and smoke hits me like a rogue wave. I hear people yelling and more glass breaks. We run down the street. One block. Two blocks. My throat burns and my eyes tear up. Benjamin pants. Yet we continue until we are one block away from Anne Marie's house.

All of a sudden, I see shadows slithering around the corner. I hear a cacophony of voices.

“Heil Hitler,” they chant. I almost gag at those words. How could one man be a vessel of such hatred and wrongness? The shadows get closer. They are holding torches. I pull Benjamin around the corner of a building and crouch down. The pounding of my heart fills my head. The terrible shadows continue marching and don't notice us. I thank G-d - that was close.

Looking around, Benjamin and I stand up and walk forward. We don't notice the flies or the smell of blood. We keep walking until we hit the body.

Benjamin is the first to notice it. What he sees may traumatize him for life. The owner of our local shoe store, Mr. Kaufmann, lies face up on the pavement. Mr. Kaufmann was a Jew. All of the victims of tonight were Jewish. If this horrific act of violence could happen to him, it could happen to any of us. Benjamin squeals. I gasp, then cover his mouth with my hand.

“Ruhig !”

There is a deep red gash where the bullet has penetrated Mr. Kaufmann's head. His empty eyes stare up as if to cry out against the unfairness. This site is truly terrifying, but I know it is crucial to move on or we will end up just like this poor man. After I find safety, the events of tonight will hit me like a speeding bullet, but for now, I must focus. I see Anne Marie's house. I wipe the tears and sweat from my face, squeeze Benjamin's hand, and proceed to the door. I knock quickly and urgently. Anne Marie opens it. She sees us.

“Ruth, Benjamin? What are you doing here?”

“Haven't you heard the glass shattering and the screams?” Benjamin asks. “Will you save us from them?”

Anne Marie goes very pale. “I suppose you'd better come in.”

The Face Of Guilt

I let out a piercing screech after a large, heavy man mindlessly tramples me to the ice-covered street. Snow burns right through my clothes as it flies from people's quick feet. I clutch onto the thin, worn dress that belongs to my disoriented daughter. My grip tightens as I am determined not to lose sight of her in the midst of dazed Jews. I manage to hoist myself up and continue with the rest of the frantic crowd. It was only hours ago that I kissed my two children goodnight and fell securely asleep next to my beloved husband. Now I am disappearing into an ocean of morose faces, all being deported, who don't seem to notice me, judging by the way they push past my ice-cold body. Then, I see the countenance of someone who vanished from my life. My mind becomes lost in the memory of a familiar face.

"Claus Scheiner." The name emerges from behind my lips, lingering in the chilled air that stings as I breathe in. I no longer ache from the cold, but from the feeling of betrayal. I am suddenly brought back to a time with my family gathered around my dark oak table where I once sat comfortably with the company of a dearest friend. A close neighbor. Claus Scheiner.

Laughter filled the room recollecting an image of Ruth, my youngest daughter, prancing around the living room in my high heels, holding a gavel.

"Oooh. My daughter, the potential judge. That's meshugganah!" Everyone giggled except Claus, who appeared to be engrossed in a newspaper entry. He broke away from the paper and gazed at me with a quick, unsettling expression. His eyebrows were somewhat furrowed and directed towards his nose, his lips were drawn apart giving the impression that he was at a loss for words.

"Claus? What's wrong?" I walked briskly over to his chair and snatched the newspaper from his hands, eager to see. It read, "NEW LAW EXCLUDING NON-ARYANS FROM GOVERNMENT JOBS." Lightning went through me as I thought of my husband, Simon, a philosophy teacher for 15 years. What good would it do to fire faultless people? What does this mean for us?

"Simon, come here! Quickly!!!" He hurried to the doorway and I threw the news article at him.

"Kinder. Children, why don't you play upstairs for a little while so the adults can talk?" Our kids ran upstairs and immediately the energy in the room dropped.

I went into a whispering frenzy. "Simon, they're firing Jewish teachers! I mean, what does that mean for you? What? As of today you can't work anymore? I mean that's ridiculous!"

"I'm so sorry about this Roza, Simon, Really, I wish there was something I could do. But for now, I guess I'd better leave you two to talk. Thank you for the wonderful evening." Claus said solemnly. He then politely excused himself from our home.

Claus

I withdrew myself from their comfortable home. The night may have been silent, but my thoughts were deafening. Roza and Simon lost their only income, yet the only worry I had was for my own life. What could that mean for me? What might I lose considering that the government had taken away the jobs of innocent people?

The next morning I woke up with overwhelming guilt, although a clearer understanding of why the government may have authorized the discharging of non-Aryan's jobs. Evidently, there is something that non-Aryans are at fault for, otherwise the government would not have proceeded to fire them.

Roza

"Simon, it's been months. Months! Claus has not once acknowledged our existence, nor tried to help us with our money, food, advice." I started to wonder if Claus still believed in us. If he still accepted us in a time of need.

"Roza, Claus is a good friend. If he has been distant, there is probably something going on in his personal life that he is trying to deal with. If anything, we should go to him and offer our help." Without speaking another word, I pushed open the front door with urgency and trotted over to Claus's small, stone townhouse. Before I even knocked once on the thick wood door, Claus bolted outside, almost tripping over me. We met eyes and for the first time, I saw disdain washing away his cheer and innocence. And that was before I caught sight of it. The despicable symbol of hatred and brutality: protruding from the edge of his shirt, the bold, black and red Swastika shown. His animosity struck my heart. I had truly come to my senses. We were no longer individuals. Claus sought hatred, with no exceptions for the family that had been loyal to him for years. It didn't matter who we were or what we were known for. We were "imperfect" to him, therefore disposable.

Claus

The disappointment in Roza's eyes had enough power to change one's mind. But she, after all, was just a Jew.

After years of avoiding all interaction, the shameful friendship haunts my past. I cannot avoid the roars of Jews the bombarded street. I look around at all of the helpless people, glad to see that I am not in the mix. That is until I see the one the face of the woman who shames me.

"Roza Perlman." The name spews out of my mouth with more hatred than intended. But when the frantic sea of Jews forces her to the ground, it's as if I am... guilty. Guilty for abandoning the loyalty and comfort of our friendship. They were my good friends and I left them isolated and lonely. But now, standing in front of my secluded home, seeing them in a huge crowd of people, it seems as though I am the one alone.

Forward March

“Hartmann! Why aren’t you with the rest of the boys?” I heard my group leader, Kaspar, bellowing behind me. I turned around, dragging my foot in the dust of the field where I learned how to march.

“I...A button fell off of my jacket. I didn’t know what to do, and...” I started.

“You’ll have to go without it. Try not to make it obvious, and get in line.” Kaspar muttered. I nodded and ran towards the lines of boys, their blue eyes shining with pride as they prepared to march on. I quickly found my place in the block, next to my friend Lutz. Although I wanted so badly to tell him why I was late, I couldn’t without risk of being called out by one of the adults. At only 14 years old, I was one of the youngest members of my division of the Hitler Youth group. I knew that I had to behave in order to keep from being punished. Straightening my back and shoulders, I watched as the Nazi officers carefully checked that each boy looked ready to march, down to the hair on their heads.

“Hartmann Brunswick?” A tall man, dressed in a militaristic shade of green from head to toe, loomed over me, his gruff voice almost robotic from the number of boys he had evaluated before me.

“That’s me, sir,” I replied, trying not to sound as timid as I felt. The officer glanced at me, checked off another box on his clipboard, and moved down the line. Looking to the left, I saw a boy who I didn’t recognize. He looked younger than me, and he was still shaking from the officer’s inspection. “Don’t worry,” I reassured him, “in a few minutes we’ll start marching, and you’ll lose yourself in the crowd.”

“That’s the thing,” he said, as he turned to look at me, his deep blue eyes burning with intensity, “By becoming a part of the Hitler Youth, I feel as if I’ve lost a part of who I am.” His words shook me to my core as I saw more and more groups lining up behind mine. They looked like one unit, not teenage boys, but machines built to serve the Nazis. I glanced down at the swastika on my sleeve as a shiver went down my spine. The red of the flag seemed to be bolder than it had ever been, and I thought for a moment that I should have run from the group before Kaspar had seen me dragging behind. Then, I considered the alternative, and reluctantly made up my mind that it was safer to be here instead. A piercing whistle shook me from my thoughts, and I realized that the soldiers’ evaluations were over. It was time to begin the parade.

“Forward march!” a soldier barked. Like marionettes, thousands of us moved in unison. We were no longer in control of our rigid movements; the Nazis were our puppeteers. I soon settled into the familiar rhythm of boots on concrete as we slowly approached my hometown of Lindau. Although the parade was constantly stopping and starting again, I found it easy to drift into my own thoughts. During each parade, it had felt almost serene to reflect on what life had been like before the nightmare that was World War II.

I stationed myself at my usual place on the staircase, ready to watch the glee spread across my mother’s face when my father finally came home from a long day of working at the largest general store in the town of Konstanz. My father, while he was working there, was a good-natured, amiable man, and so he made many friends and acquaintances working at the general store. These friends were normally what he told my mother about- all of the people who came in, what they bought, and the words they shared each day. However, when I saw my father’s face after he burst through the door, I knew something was awry. This was the first time I had ever seen my father look that afraid, and I knew I would never forget the

expression on his face. My mother stood up, pale as a sheet, and waited for my father to explain what was going on.

“Margarete, we can’t wait any longer. He’s planning to control every aspect of our lives, and it has to start soon. My friend Theodor- you know, the one who works for the Führer- he came into the store today, and pulled me aside. I’m worried, Margarete. We have to send him away.”

“I know, Thiemo. I know. I just don’t think I can bear it if he’s gone.”

“It’s the only chance we have. If this ‘plan’ starts to go any further, he could be taken to a worse fate than the one we’ve set up for him. Do you have his birth certificate? I can take it to Ludger tomorrow, and he’ll have the forged copy done by Tuesday.” At that moment, fear overtook me, and I started to climb slowly up the stairs. I tried not to make a sound, but one stair creaked and my parent’s voices crept to hushed whispers. All I heard of the rest of the conversation was the mournful, reluctant sigh of my mother saying, “I’ll get the certificate. The Deringers have agreed to take him in as soon as next week.”

“Hartmann? Wake up. It was just a bad dream.” My mother jolted me awake from my fifth consecutive dream since I had learned my parents were planning to send me away.

“Mama, I know it isn’t just a dream. What aren’t you and Papa telling me?” I asked sleepily, hoping and wishing my dreams weren’t real, although deep down I knew I would be leaving home soon. My mother, as if she knew what was going through my mind, looked at me, her face tense and her green eyes focusing on mine.

“I’ll tell you, but you have to promise to follow our plan, or we could put our and others’ lives in serious danger. Do you understand?” I finally realized just how dire this situation was.

“Yes. I promise. I’ll do whatever you say.”

I took a deep breath as I remembered my past. My coat button, which I had stowed away in my left boot, had moved from the toe to the heel. It served as a reminder that I was a toy soldier, marching in a parade, and wasn’t back with my parents before I was sent away. Although it had been two years since I had seen my mother, the final sentences she spoke to me were forever burned in my memory.

“Hartmann, my brave man. That’s what your name means, but I had never imagined you’d have to be as brave as you do today,” she had said, stifling a sob as she hugged me. I had hoped she’d never let go.

As I passed by different buildings on the main street of Lindau, wonderful memories flooded my head- running into the toy store to buy my favorite red model train, playing tag with my friends in the schoolyard, learning to ride a bike down the wobbly streets of town. Since I had left home, however, these memories had been overshadowed by more recent ones, like telling my parents I loved them for the last time. By now, I knew I’d never see them again, and if I somehow did, it would be in a place worse than hell.

I looked out over the endless sea of people, Hitler’s adoring fans. They all cheered for us while raising their right hands into the air to show their so-called support for the Führer. I didn’t think I could watch anymore, when out of the corner of my eye I saw my new parents, Philipp and Ottilie. They smiled and waved when they saw me glancing at them. I wished I could do more than just look, but I was forbidden to do anything but conform to the group. Suddenly, my heart skipped a beat as the parade stopped. Standing next to my parents was a woman with striking green eyes. Could it really be her?

I looked into her eyes, and she looked back at me with the same expression that I remembered from that night two years ago. She seemed to be beckoning to me with her eyes. My heart started to pound in my chest, to the point where I thought it was going to burst. With an idea playing like a movie in my mind, I knew what I had to do.

The boys in front of me started to march again, and instead of following them, I broke ranks and raced into my mother's arms. Everybody in the crowd near us silenced for what felt like eternity, even though it was only a few seconds long. In that moment, I clung to my mother as if I was falling and she was the only one who could catch me. As a Nazi officer ripped me out of my mother's arms, I came to the realization that I had been wrong earlier that day. Even though it was the last day of my short life, running from the group was the best decision I would ever make. Although I would suffer the consequences, I felt that death was better than having to be a part of a group that was created purely to spread hatred for people like me. By defying the Nazis, I had another chance to feel my mother's embrace before our lives were stolen from us forever.

I snapped back into reality, my feet starting to move in unison with the other boys. I felt as if my decision had already been made for me when my new parents took me in two years ago. As we continued to march, I felt my mother's gaze burning into the back of my head. Was that the last I'll ever see of her? I wondered if walking past my mother had been the right thing to do. While we would both have died, would it have been worth it to be with her in our final moments? I imagined what life could have been like if the Nazi regime had been only a bad dream. As tears welled up in my eyes, I tried not to think about how simply hugging my mother was now a privilege that I no longer had. You can't cry. You can't cry or you'll be punished and seen as weak. It seemed that I couldn't try hard enough not to think about my mother. Even after the parade had ended and I went back to Otilie and Philipp's home, I still contemplated over which would be a better fate: never seeing my mother's face again or becoming another Jewish soul lost.

The Lost Letter

I watched through my window as the truck pulled away. I knew it was her, the blue knitted mittens concealing her hands. My eyes stung as I waved to her, knowing the lack of a yellow star on my chest was separating me from my best friend. I would have given anything to have that six-pointed star on my chest if it meant I wouldn't have to lose Sara. I felt a hand on my shoulder. Slowly, I turned to see my mother behind me.

"When will Sara be back?" I asked

"Soon," she replied as she brought her finger across my cheek to stop the tears. Even at my young age of 11, I could sense her words of comfort were just that, words of comfort. I sank to the floor in despair. My eyes found Jesus on the crucifix that hung on my wall. I looked at him and prayed.

"God please," I pleaded, "If nothing else, bring Sara home."

My mind wandered. Where they could be taking her? My habit of imagining the worst could not even compare to what she would be forced to go through. Tears ran down my cheek as I was flooded with all of our good memories. I could not face the fact that I might be losing her forever. I picked up my pen and began to write to her,

Dear Sara,

October 1939

I want you to know that everything will be okay. I hope that you will be coming back home soon. I don't know how I will go on without you. You are the person I tell my secrets to. You are the person who always been there when I need you. You are the sister that I never had.

Sobs caused my whole body to shake. The words coming from the pen were almost illegible. Tears fell onto the words I had written, blurring my vision and smearing the ink. I heard the sound of my pain echoing throughout my room. I tried to take a deep breath, but the air wouldn't go in. I was shaking more than ever. My cheeks burned as I tasted the salty tears in my mouth. I closed my eyes to remember. The stories from my time with Sara flowed from my pen to the page.

My dear Sara, do you remember all the times we spent together? Do you remember the time we were scolded by my neighbor, Mrs. Schmidt? When we snuck into her garden early in the morning to pluck some of her prettiest flowers for our hair. She was tomato red as she chased us off her lawn. I don't think we stopped laughing for hours while we braided those daisies into our hair. Or the time that we snuck your family's radio into your room, and we played the music as loud as it could go? We danced until we could no longer stand, and we sang until we could no longer speak. The summer breeze seemed to be dancing around your room with us. The sun was shining through the blinds in your window, warming the carpet that lay on your floor. And one of my favorite memories of all, the time that we knitted our friendship mittens. My mother had just taught us how to knit and we had spent an entire night making matching mittens. We had said that they symbolized everything our friendship stood for. That they represented how our hands would always be open to hold when one of us was having a bad day. They would keep our hands just as warm as the laughter we shared. I hope Sara, that you never forget that my hand will always be here for you to hold when you need it. Sara, I hope that those mittens will keep you warm until we meet again.

Love,

Your best friend forever, Emilia

Finally, my tears had stopped enough so that I could see. I folded up my letter and held it to my heart. The letter was sealed with all of the love in my heart. I handed it to my mother.

“Mom, can you mail this so that it gets to Sara?” I whimpered.

My mother did not respond, but instead pulled me into a tight embrace. She kissed the top of my head as she took the letter from my hand.

The Liberation

“Mikhail! Control your damn pony. We must enter the camp cautiously if we are to avoid an ambush.”

“Apologies, Komdiv Ivanov!” Mikhail belted out with dog-like obedience. Truthfully Mikhail almost wished to be ambushed, he had not seen a German for the last 50 kilometers. “Perhaps we should send out a scout,” a shaky sounding voice cried out.

Komdiv Ivanov surveyed the 322nd Rifle Division for the origin of the comment. After a bone-chilling silence, Komdiv Ivanov spoke aloud, “We will send no scout. The Red Army does not risk information being lost with the life of one incompetent soldier. Are these simple precautions clear, comrades?” The men nodded at Ivanov with grim acceptance.

“Very good,” he said like a teacher to their young student, “Now be silent all of you, we are approaching the camp.”

A barbed-wire fence was now in sight and in it the outlines of human figures. The men held their rifles close preparing for gunfire to be sent their way, however, this bullet storm never came. As they drew closer to the fence they began to notice something. The figures were thin to the point where their skeletons were visible. They all wore the same ragged jumpsuit with stripes.

“Stand down comrades, these are no soldiers,” Ivanov barked at the men. It was obvious Ivanov knew something the other men didn’t. The men lowered their rifles and tried to make sense of what they were looking at. Ivanov pulled a letter from his saddlebag, opened it and read a name, “Nikolai Turgenev?” A pair of boots hit the snow and up walked a lengthy soldier with curly hair. “You Turgenev?” Ivanov asked while looking him up and down.

“I am him. Is something the matter Komdiv?” Nikolai said curiously. Nikolai’s question was completely ignored as Ivanov was obviously looking for something on him.

“That chain on your neck. Let me see it,” Ivanov said as he motioned toward a silver chain barely visible on the nape of Nikolai’s neck. Nikolai seemed stunned and hesitated as he reached towards his chain. “Turgenev, you wouldn’t make your division commander ask again, would you?” Ivanov said with a foreboding tone. Nikolai’s eyes lit up and within a second the chain was in Ivanov’s grasp. Ivanov searched every inch of the chain until, “Ah, exactly as I thought” Ivanov held a tiny star of David pinched between his fingers. “Very stupid to wear one of these don’t want the Nazis to put a target on your head,” Ivanov said.

“Well, Komdiv, the way I see it the Germans are already shooting at me, a chain isn’t gonna make a difference,” Nikolai said snarkily. Ivanov grinned for a moment but went right back to giving orders.

“You see those people behind that fence, they are Jewish men that have seen nothing but Germans for who knows how long, so I assume they’re not very trusting of anyone at the moment,” Ivanov explained. “You walk up calmly with that chain and ask them where the Germans are, understand?”

“Understood, Komdiv Ivanov!” Nikolia saluted Ivanov and then walked off to confront the other men behind the fence. Nikolia approached them carefully, and while wary at first, they began to speak to Nikolia. The men fell quiet trying to make-out what the Jewish men were telling Nikolia. Slowly Nikolia headed back towards the troops; whatever they told Nikolia startled him. His movements were slow as if he could collapse at any moment, his face showed a concoction of emotional shock, fear, and anger. Mikhail saw his distress and went to help him back to Komdiv Ivanov. Ivanov, a man who lets no question go unanswered, seemed afraid to ask Nikolia what he was told. Ivanov got off his pony and met eye-level with Nikolia.

“Turgenev?” he asked but was met with no response. “Turgenev! What is it you know?”

“Dear God.” No words better fit what Mikhail saw when he stepped through the gates of Auschwitz. In every direction, they were faced with unimaginable horror. Mikhail had heard of labor camps before; every Russian feared the Siberian labor camps, but this, this was something else entirely. Ivanov called men over to tend to the wounded and every man passed out what rations he had to the now free Jewish people. Mikhail and Nikolia were ordered to search the camp for information. They noticed a smoldering pile and went to investigate. Mikhail reached into the pile, and instantly his blood ran cold, as he realized that what he held was a young child’s shoe. Then it became clear, this pile was thousands of clothes, each one representing a life lost. A sickening feeling shot through the two men. Neither could remember the last time they had cried but tears began to glaze over their eyes. They stared and stared until they couldn’t bear to stare any longer.

There were two distinct types of people the days following the liberation: Those with eyes that looked back at the past and its horrors and these eyes were found on every Russian soldier. The other, the eyes of those who looked towards the future and its freedoms, these eyes belonged to the free Jewish men and women. As Mikhail sat down warming himself by the fire these two distinct eyes met. A girl approached him, aged by her experiences, but clearly beautiful. It took Mikhail by surprise, he had heard the woman’s section of the camp had been liberated but had not seen any of these women until now.

“Do you mind if I warm myself as well?” she asked politely. He noticed her leg was wrapped so he helped her sit down. “Thank you!” she said with the biggest smile Mikhail had ever seen. They talked about many things, especially what they were going to do after the war. In his whole life, making conversation was never a strong-suit of Mikhail but with her it was easy. When she talked he listened intently and when he spoke she wanted to hear every detail. When they did finally run out of things to talk about they just sat enjoying each other’s company. Amidst the silence, Mikhail worked up the confidence to ask her what he’s been wanting to know since she sat down.

“How can you go on after what you went through?” he asked solemnly. She pondered on this for a long while seeming to try in finding the best way to explain.

“Well,” she said, “I was condemned to this place for months and what happened here will haunt me to my grave. However, being surrounded by nothing but death changes you. Life becomes like a precious gem; every detail is beautiful and must not be taken for granted.” She looked at Mikhail who was obviously astonished by her answer. They looked out past the barbed wire walls of the camp, past the chaotic war raging around them, and together they looked on towards the future.

Walking on the Cracks

The ride up the winding country road was the same as she remembered. The German mountain ranges were a backdrop for her quiet town's main characters -- the cows. As she peered through her car's cloudy window, the woman immediately recognized the shack of a home at the edge of the town.

Surely, it had been nearly 50 years since she had visited. Why was she here? The town didn't miss her, especially when she wasn't wanted in the first place. Many of the others go deaf to the suggestion of returning. Yet there she was, sitting in the cold sputtering car. Even with the weight of the heavy car door begging her not to face the past, she was able to pry it open and place one foot on a sealed crack in the road. That glossed over imperfection was a rearview mirror, and with the glimpse into the past it offered, red came to her eyes and numbness to her arm.

"Come on, Heidi," her Mama had called.

"I'm coming Mama," the little girl had cried as her pigtails flopped in the blistering wind.

She was born into a family of walkers, but it took her time to catch up. Her Mama's Sunday walks were simple, just walk and talk, but she was initially dubious to accept that walking without a purpose could be rewarding. It wasn't until she started attending primary school that she looked forward to their route to the bakery on the path she named, "Weg zur Unendlichkeit"-- the way to infinity.

She had grown to love this path. It'd connected her to the town square and beyond. A stray sheep or country boy could be seen crossing it, but otherwise, it was all hers. Here the lone farmer on his plow became the devilish pirate chasing after their gold sack. The tree branches shading the path glittered in the morning and sprouted wings at dusk. The town's windmill blade was the propeller for the ladies' private airplane. Their conversations transcended the physical act, as each step on the smooth pavement blurred the view of their outskirted cottage.

"Mama! The bag is too heavy. We bought too much bread!"

"Heidi," laughed Mama. "There's never too much bread."

The little girl grunted and continued trudging up the icy path to her home. They opened the door and walked in. Her cold red nose was greeted by the warmth of the fire her father was building in the family room.

She dropped the bag of bread and sweats and darted to the tall man. "Papa, you're home early from sea," screamed the little girl .

"Yes," he said. "I guess all the fish in the sea are hiding... but actually, my Shayna Punim, I have to speak with Mama." He swiftly grabbed Mama's arm and guided her to the kitchen.

The little girl stayed back in the family room and heard the sounds of muffled fighting over the crackle of the fire. The sound of Mama's voice undulated as Papa slammed a manilla envelope on the kitchen table. What could they be talking about? Was it about the fish? Was there really no more fish in the sea? No, he was just joking about all the fish hiding; he's a great fisherman nonetheless.

“My Shayna Punim...come here,” called Papa. Now seated, Mama and Papa stared calmly at the little girl.

“We have something we have to give you...it’s, it’s a present,” explained Papa. He pulled out three patched yellow stars. “Think of it as, as..um... an accessory that me, you, and Mama all have to wear all the time now on our arms.” Papa sighed deeply and handed her the six-sided shape.

“Ooo,” the little girl said. “I love stars; I look like a fairy!” She traced the six sides with her fingers and proudly stamped it on her side. Her parents stared at her blankly with meek smiles.

“Let’s have the challah now!” squealed the girl.

A week passed, and the girl proudly wore her patch. Even in the thick snowfall, she was eager to parade into town; however, her path suddenly became more crowded.

One day, thick black boots arrived in her town, and invaded the path. The boots were constantly kicking up grass, stomping in place, and digging into the smooth gravel. The girl pretended not to notice the boot’s menacing stares at her star, and, instead, smiled at the passing pairs.

“I guess this trail was never truly all mine,” thought the little girl as she observed more and more boots each day.

The next Sunday had arrived, and the girl danced out of bed and snatched the muslin bakery bag from the living room. She sprinted into her parent’s room and drew open the blinds.

“Come on Mama,” screamed the girl. “It’s Weg zur Unendlichkeit day! Let’s go to the bakery.”

“Ok, ok, stop screaming love,” yawned Mama, “But we can only get one sweet bread today.” The girl helped throw clothes on the half-asleep woman, and then dragged her out the door, and onto the path.

“Stop running Heidi! It’s icy,” screamed Mama. The woman yanked the girl back by her skirt and told her to look at the ground when she walked. The little girl looked down and was astonished. The faded grey floor had deep cuts running from her front yard to the townsquare. Mama noticed the girl’s disgust.

“Oh don’t fret, my love.” Mama explained, “the Ole Weg zur Unendlichkeit is just cracked because it’s winter,”

The girl simply nodded and stared at the black boots in the distance coming towards them. They marched faster, creating a new crack with every step. The boots stomped and yelled at the two women. Mama’s face sunk. Frozen with fear, she quietly motioned for her girl to go back home. The girl walked backwards slowly with her gaze remaining on the boots, but the boots chased after her. They thudded and broke the icy cover on the pavement. The girl’s legs started to fly beneath her as she pumped her arms through the thick winter air.

Home. Thud. Thud. Go back Home. Her glare aimed at the house at the end of the path. Home. Back to Papa. Home. Thud.

“AGH!” The girl screamed. She had tripped over the fragmented pavement, her knees imprinted in the rough gravel, and her face pounded on the pavement. She landed on her side with her arm with the star facing up. The faint cries of her mother were muted by the pounding of her heart. She only saw red, yet she could feel something big towering over her. Thud. Thud.

The girl remained still for what seemed like hours. She closed her eyes and started to lift her head.

“Jude,” screamed the boots as they stomped on the girl’s yellow patch.

Crack!

The woman quickly withdrew her leg from the road and slammed the car door shut. Her hands trembled as she fumbled with the car keys. She jolted the car in reverse and sped down the road, forging new scars in her path.

Follow the Stars

Prologue: Spring, 1940

It's nice to know the stars will never change. Twinkling, so far away. A cool night breeze sent the trees and leaves rustling. My boy, Johannes, and I would always come out to look at the stars. Tonight was special, though. In the distance we could see brighter lights, yellows, oranges, and grays, amidst the blues and purple of the night.

"Han." Mrs. Van de Kar called us in. "You cannot be out tonight! It's not safe."

Not safe? Why tonight when the sky is so beautiful?

No matter, I followed Johannes to his room and we watched the skies from the cracked open windows.

It was late, the night was cold, and I allowed the starlight to carry me away.

I hoped life would always be this way.

Winter, 1942: Two Years Later

"We'll go for a walk today, Leven." Johannes said softly, as he put his jacket on in our room.

I felt as my tail started wagging.

It had been a long time since we'd gone on a walk. In fact, we rarely went outside these days. Not even to look at the stars. I suppose that's why Johannes wears the star now. So he can carry the stars with him everywhere.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Johannes asked. I bobbed my head. I would like that, very much. Johannes opened the door and I followed him, down the stairs.

We passed Mrs. Van de Kar in the kitchen with Emmaline, Johannes' older sister.

"Han," Mr. Van de Kar called, walking towards Johannes and me as we stood at the door. "I will go with you." Well, I'm sure Mr. Van de Kar needed fresh air, and a good walk, too.

"Can I please go, Papa?" Lina, the younger sister of Johannes asked.

Lina scratched behind my ears gently. She was the tiniest and sweetest of my family. She should come, too. What a wonderful idea.

"No, no, Lina." Mr. Van de Kar said, "Please stay here with your Mama and Emmaline."

"Oh, alright, Papa." Lina sniffled a bit, then hugged me. She whispered: "Love you, Leven." Then she let go. I licked her face, trying to cheer her up. I could also taste the leftover crumbs of breakfast on her cheeks.

After we left, the first few minutes of the walk were uneventful. Mr. Van de Kar stayed close by, and Johannes did not talk to me as he usually does.

When we reached the end of the sidewalk near the forest, we did not turn around, but instead we headed into the forest. I looked up at Johannes, but his eyes would not meet mine. Maybe we were headed to a new park.

But we soon stopped in the middle of the forest.

“Leven.” Johannes started. “Let’s practice. Sit.” I sat down and looked back at Johannes.

“Good boy.” He responded, but there was no treat. Not this time.

“Shake.” I put my paw in his hand and he shook it.

“Good boy. Now lay down.” I did so, and Johannes’ arms went around me. “Good boy.” He whispered, and I felt water fall on my nose. I pulled back and Johannes’ eyes were red and shiny. I licked his tears away. Why was he crying? Could he not find the park?

“I’m sorry I have to leave you.” Johannes said. “But I could not bear to let them put you down, Leven.”

Leave me?

Johannes stood and started out of the woods. I went after him, but my collar yanked me back.

I looked back to see the rope around my collar had been tied to a tree.

I looked back at Johannes and let out a low whine. My heart started to ache.

“Please.” Johannes choked out. Please stay, boy. I love you so much. Please.”

Tied down, I had no other choice but to watch as Johannes and Mr. van de Kar fade further and further away. And feel the ache in me grow stronger and stronger.

Later That Day

It didn’t take long. A little biting and use of my nose and I was free of my collar just as the sun started to reach the other side of the sky.

Johannes knew I could get out of my collar. He did not leave me behind, of course he did not. I had to find him.

I turned back to the way we came and raced back towards home, our home. I could recognize our road, and as soon as I got onto the sidewalk, I raced towards that familiar smell. A smell of happiness and family.

I ran up to the door, and it was left open. They must be waiting for me.

I nudged the ajar door open more and ran in. The whole house was dark, but I could still see the house. It was a disaster. The chairs were turned over and all the cabinets had been rummaged through. The first floor was empty.

I ran up to Johannes’ room, and it matched the rest of the house. A torn apart, disaster. Why had he done this to his room?

I barked; in case my family was hiding. No response. I barked again. Three times. Four. Five. They really weren't here. They had left me.

No, there had to be some way I could find Johannes. I smelled. He was not here... but his scent was still in the air. I followed it downstairs and outside. Then down the street, down Haven Street, and even further.

Then it almost stopped, right at the train tracks. This is where the train comes and goes. Had a train taken the Van de Kars? The question already had an answer, because I smelled them.

The train seemed to head left, to the east. It was dark out now, but I could follow the tracks all night.

I hurried down the tracks, and at some point- I had started to run, to stop that ache in my heart. I hadn't a clue how long or far I'd gotten, but I started to see people in the distance. As I drew nearer, I could make out two men.

Maybe they could help me find Johannes. Maybe Johannes had told them about me. Maybe they had food to share, as well. I started towards them, and once they saw me, they turned to face me.

"Go dog!" One shouted, and I drew back. "Leave! Go!"

Wouldn't they help me?

"Didn't you hear me? GO!" He called again.

"Maybe he needs a clearer message." The other said, as he pulled up his long, dark stick.

Was he going to hit me? I started backpedaling off the tracks.

CRACK.

I nearly leaped out of my fur. What was that?

I ran further away, and I turned to see him draw up his stick again, I turned back forward and sprinted away. Far, far into the forest. I abandoned Johannes' path and did not look back.

Did this make me a coward?

It didn't matter anymore. I just kept running.

Two Days Later

I wandered the woods for a bit. I was too far from the tracks to pick up Johannes' scent again. I'll admit, I was afraid to go back there, as well.

I ate some of the leaves I found, berries, too. I was still hungry.

The forest were quiet as forests are, but the one difference was that smell. A terrible, rotten smell that had drifted across all the land. It was strong, and almost everywhere. I didn't know much, but I knew that it should not smell like that. That knowledge left an unsettling feeling in me.

All the trees and shrubs in this forest looked the same for all the time I had been wandering around. Would I be stuck here forever? No, I wouldn't be- I can't. I have to find Johannes; I have to find my boy.

Then I heard something that brought me out of my thoughts and back to the present.

A soft... snuffle. More like a heavy sigh. Only humans snuffle like that. I smelled it, too. There was someone else, a person, in the forest with me.

I followed the noise to a small opening. There was a tiny person bent over, shaking. I stepped out towards them and when they spun to see if something was there - I saw it was a little girl, like Lina.

She jumped back at the sight of me. Was she afraid? She started to cry a bit again. She reminded me so much of Lina. So tiny and fragile. Why is she out here all alone?

I should make her feel better, because I would want Lina to feel better. How do I make Lina laugh?...

I stepped a bit further away from her, and with eyes still trained on me, I rolled over on my back and let my tongue fall out of my mouth.

The little girl let out a small laugh. Still far from happy, but she wasn't crying anymore. She scooted a bit closer.

"What are you doing out here all alone?" Her voice was as tiny as she was.

I rolled back onto my stomach. She came a bit closer and reached her hand out. I leaned into her palm; it was so cold. She moved her hand to scratch behind my ear, just as Lina did.

"You are such a good dog." She burrowed her fingers into my fur. "I do not know why you are out here, but you are a blessing to me." She tilted her head so her eyes met mine. "Are you lost?"

I let out a small whine, which was enough of a yes for her. She stood up and grabbed some paper and a medal circle from where she'd been sitting.

"Sorry I had a small breakdown." She explained. "My name is Truus, and I'm headed to my Oma's house, since my Mama and Papa were taken. My Oma is not Jewish, but Mama is half, and Papa is. Do you want to come too?"

This time, she did not wait for a whine, but simply headed in the direction of Oma's home. I followed in tow.

So, we were on our way. Hopefully, this Oma would be able to help me. Perhaps this was the same Oma Johannes spoke of so fondly.

Our walk started out slow and Truus told me about herself. Just as Johannes and I did. It was comforting. Truus was eleven - nearly twelve. Her parents were taken to a camp, but Truus was able to escape into the forest. Her special compass was guiding us, along with her map. We would be there soon.

Yet I wondered how soon, for it was nearly night again.

The Next Day

Truus was bundled up well, but it was so cold. We needed to be at Oma's soon. We'd rested for an hour and we were going now.

"We have ought to give you a proper name, instead of dog." Truus said, shivering. "What about the name... Willem? Do you like it?"

My name is Leven, though...

"Of course you do."

We kept walking, Truus talking to me, Willem, I suppose, and I stopped short.

"What is it, Willem?"

A rotten, ugly smell. Like when the town butcher threw out the rotten meat behind his shop, and you could smell it 100 feet away. Truus let out a small gagging noise, aa we walked on, it only got stronger.

Then I saw it. A pit full of sleeping people. What were they doing here?

One was close and I nudged the man, trying to wake him.

"Oh, oh." Truus sounded like she was choking. "Willem... Willem let's go."

But the man was not waking up.

"Willem!" Truus yanked me away and she started to run, faster and faster. I began to run next to her. We ran until we could not smell the rotting smell anymore.

Truus' eyes were red again, and I rubbed my head against her. It took a moment for her to catch her breath. Then, wordlessly, Truus started leading us towards Oma's again.

This time, we were lost in the silence. And the silence told me, no one was sleeping in the forest.

We eventually got to the edge of the forest. Our old world seemed to drop off into a new world of grain, endless fields, and farmland.

"Oma's house has the beautiful trees in front of it." Truus explained, finally gaining her voice back. "And if I remember from when I was here... it was so long ago... her home should be over that hill."

We both raced up the hill and there was the big tree. We ran to the front door, and Truus knocked. No answer.

"It's okay." Truus reassured, although it seemed like it was more of a reassurance for her than for me. She bent to lift the door mat; underneath was a loose brick in the porch. She lifted it, and underneath was a key. The door opened with a creak, and the lights were off inside.

"Hello?" Truus called out. "Oma?"

She raced to a shut door and pushed it open. I couldn't see what was there, but I heard Truus gasp.

“Please.” She said, and I poked my head in the door way to find a young woman and two men standing in Oma’s kitchen. I don’t think any of them were Oma. “Are you German Soldiers? Please do not hurt me.”

“Do not worry.” The woman said, approaching us with palms out. Unarmed, no metal sticks. “We’re with the Dutch Resistance.” She continued. “We’re fighting the German Soldiers.”

Truus shifted, “Where is Oma then?”

Before the woman could answer, another voice did.

“Truus?” I turned to see an older woman standing behind Truus and me. Truus turned and ran up to hug the woman, who must’ve been Oma.

“Oh, my Truus.” Oma murmured. “I was so worried.”

Truus was home. Happy and safe.

Seeing her with her Oma made me wonder where Lina was now.

Where Johannes was.

And now that Truus had finally found Oma, I couldn’t help but wonder what would become of me?

Four Days Later

I had slept with Truus for the past few nights at Oma’s. Every night she told me I was her saving grace; I had given her faith while we were in the forest. Truus helped me feel whole again.

But I still missed Johannes. I feared I may never be able to rack him down again. I tried to focus on the positive, and stay with Truus for now.

This morning was different, though.

Truus and Oma were packing there bags. A car was waiting outside of Oma’s house. Truus pet me as she was packing, and when she was done, she put her bag in the car.

“Well, Willem.” Truus bent down to meet my eyes. “It’s time to go... I love you.”

I loved Truus, too.

She opened the door, and I hopped in, wondering where we were headed.

“No, Willem.” Truus stopped me, and shut the door. No what? We had to go, right?

“Just me, Willem.” Her eyes grew glassy. “I’m so sorry.”

She... she was leaving me.

She wrapped her small arms around me once more. “Oh, Willem. I love you. Thank you for everything.”

I loved her, too.

For every time she told me I was her saving grace, her hope - she was wrong. She was mine.

I loved Truus.

And I felt my heart begin to ache once more.

Winter, 1943: Two Weeks Later

The Resistance members let me stay at the farm with them. By now, I knew all their names. The man with the long beard and short hair was called Joseph. The younger, curly haired man was Pieter.

The nice young woman's name was Sonja.

They were all nice, however I liked Sonja the best because she would feed me. It was usually just small scraps of what they had left, but to me food was food.

"I wonder how good your memory is..." Sonja pondered to me one day as she fed me scraps of, well, I didn't quite know what. Sonja had never really spoken to me before, so this was nice.

However, I did not know what she meant.

"Well, little pup, nowadays anyone and everyone can be of assistance." She bent down to pat my head. "I think you could be very helpful. You've got some potential - you did survive in that forest with Truus, and who knows how long you had already been in there. I think you could take some of our jobs."

Jobs? Like going out into the world?

I wasn't so sure about that idea. What if I got lost in the forest again? Or those horrible men on the train tracks came back?

Sonja scratched behind my ears. "I'll give you more food?"

I could handle a few jobs.

Sonja's jobs were quite odd. They required training, like how Johannes had to train me to sit, shake, and lay down. But this training wasn't like I'd done before.

Sonja would first show me a picture of someone, usually Pieter or Joseph, but sometimes it would be new, visiting people. I would then run to look for them, they were usually standing in a room, so it was not hard. Then our training stepped up a notch. Sonja would give me a rag or a cloth to smell that held a person's scent and I would find them hiding somewhere on the farm.

Although I had the training, I still doubted myself. How could I ever find anyone if I could not even find Johannes? The thought always made my heart ache, longing for the past.

I still kept training, though. I did so because I did not want to let Sonja down.

Also, she was giving me food.

The job, Sonja said, would be about the same process. But it would be people I had never met before, so not quite as easy.

My first job came the day after training ended. Sonja placed a collar around my neck, then we - Sonja, Pieter, and I - got in a car and headed out, to somewhere else. Looking at the world running by outside the car, it seemed like we were headed towards where more people lived; towards the cities.

When we finally got out of the car, we were at a loud and busy place.

The men and women running through the halls wore blues and whites, and behind closed and open doors alike, you could hear voices and coughs.

“We’re staying at this hospital, Freddie.” Sonja told me, using the name she’d dubbed me with, once we’d gotten out of that place and into a nice, smaller room behind the building. “It’s close to the city, and we will blend in with the workers and people here.”

Sonja placed her bag on the small bed and came over to me.

“Here, Freddie.” Sonja held a cloth up to me. Time for my first job. I sniffed it and held onto its scent. Sonja then held up a picture of a man. “And this is what he looks like. You find him, wait till he takes something from your collar, and then run right back here.” Sonja pat my head. “You can do this. And remember, don’t be obvious and be careful.”

After Sonja opened the door, I set out. Once I had gotten past the overwhelming scents of the hospital, I latched onto a bit of a scent and followed it. I would not lose this, I could not. I followed the scent down the road and to a more populated area. A town, like the one Johannes and I had come from.

I finally found the scent so strong, it led to a smaller house in town. I went around back and saw him; the man from the photograph. I ran up to him, and he seemed wary at first. Once he saw my collar, he dropped down to my level.

The man, probably around Johannes’ Papa’s age, pulled a note from my collar. I hadn’t a clue it had been in there. His eyes quickly scanned the papers contents, and he abruptly stood up.

“I must tell Margot.” He wiped his eyes, yet his mouth held a smile. He shifted his gaze to me. “Thank you.”

Then he started inside, and I took this as my cue to head back to Sonja.

That was my first job, but not the last. Sometimes the people I found acknowledged me, sometimes they did not. And sometimes the news the people received filled them with joy and they thanked me, as the first man had.

This made it much easier to bear the times when it did not. It filled them with grief, and they fell to the ground choking on tears. That made me grieve as well.

I found it harder to keep track of the days now. I hadn’t a clue how long it had been. I was happy to help people, and Sonja always treated me kindly.

But I still found myself longing more for home.

And I still wondered when I would find Johannes again.

Fall, 1943

We had finally left the hospital. This time we stayed in a home near the forest, like Oma's house. There were more people in there, resistance fighters, like Sonja.

This time one of the cars they had was a big, boxy one that they had at the hospital. I was not sure if my job was to be the same as before. It would be much harder now, this far from civilization.

Not much happened my first week there. In fact the whole house was eerily quiet. It was only later did Sonja tell me what she wanted me to do.

"You're the only one small enough to fit through the brush and reach this tall fence, Freddie." Sonja and I sat in her room as she told me this. "You'll carry different things each day. Sometimes food - that you CANNOT eat. Sometimes blankets."

She turned my head from where I lay so my eyes could meet hers. "But Freddie, you must watch out for the men in dark uniforms that patrol sometimes."

Oh, she meant those men with the long sticks. Like the ones from the train tracks.

"This is a bit more dangerous than last time." I put my head back down. That was not reassuring.

However, I began Sonja's new job for me to long later.

The first thing she tied around my collar was a small basket containing food - bread, vegetables - that I could not eat. The basket was always buttoned closed anyways. I went through the forest, towards the buildings in the distance. As I got closer, the rotting smell grew worse.

Suddenly the basket did not matter as much. Any appetite I had left was gone now. I kept pushing through as the brush grew thicker and became harder to squeeze through. Eventually, the forest let out to a clearing, a more open space.

Then there was a fence. Long linked chain, with sharp points on the top. I trotted up to the fence, but no one was there. Did I leave the basket? Did I wait?

"Hey. Dog." Two men looked around and strode over, a little boy, who I had not seen earlier, limped over behind them. "What is that?" They did not wait, but took the basket from my collar.

Seeing its contents, they both let out a small gasp.

"I shall take the basket." One said.

"No." The other argued, pulling the basket. "I shall." They pulled, and did not notice the small piece of bread that fell out and tumbled down the hill toward the forest.

They stopped eventually, deciding to split the food and they ran off - contraband in their coats.

But the small boy stood there, emptyhanded. He was so thin, so frail looking. He made me think of my boy, and what he may have looked like now. I quickly sprinted down the hill, and when I came back, I held the bread lightly between my teeth.

The boy looked at me for a little bit, then quickly limped towards me. He gingerly took the bread from me. I took this as our exchange was over. It was my time to leave.

"Thank you, Engel." The boy put his hand through the chains and his hand met my head.

It was the coldest hand I'd ever felt.

“I’m Finn.” He began to scratch my head lightly. It felt so nice.

The boy, Finn, looked so lonely. “Will you be back here, Engel.”

I knew I would know.

Finn was there when I came back the next day, as were a few others from behind the fence. I suppose they’d heard about me and my basket as usual they fought; squabbled over the food.

But I had learned. I went back and grabbed a piece of bread I had in the bushes. Once the others left, Finn remained. I trotted back up the hill to him. He gently took the bread placing it in his pocket.

“Thank you, Engel.”

Finn talked to me, and I learned quickly. Finn did not live here, but someone was keeping him here. He was here all alone, which made him very sad. But when I came to visit, he became much happier. I brought him food and smiles - and he called me Engel.

Finn made me happy, too.

For a while, I didn’t know what I was doing. Before I had always made my family happy and ate food. That was my life. But now I had purpose, I felt important again.

Finn would pet me through the chains and I would lick his hands. Most days his hands held the taste of Earth and dirt. Somedays they held the salt and suffering of tears. If only I could lick away the pain.

And one day...

It sticks out in my memory so well.

I delivered the food, as always. But Finn looked worse. He limped over, shivering.

I gave him his bread.

His hand met my fur through the fence and it was burning hot.

“My Engel.” Finn whispered. He pulled me into the fence. “I love you. Thank you.”

I love you, too, Finn.

We stayed that way for a little while.

The next day I came back.

Finn was not there.

Maybe I came too early. Maybe he forgot.

I came back the next day. No Finn.

I came again, no Finn. Again, no Finn. Again, no Finn.

No Finn.

I did not want to come back after that.

Sonja found me hiding under our bed.

“Hey, buddy.” She stroked my head. “You ready to go today?”

I didn’t move. All I wanted to do was sleep. After a while, Sonja let out a sigh.

“It’s okay, Freddie.”

I heard her stand up and walk away. She left the door open; I could hear the radio down the hall.

The Allies were advancing, this was good news for the war.

War? Yes, it was war. I knew that now.

People fight, but over what? They hate, but why? What happened to love?

It didn’t matter anymore; I was done helping. I was done caring.

I sat in the lonely little room, in a house that was nowhere.

And around me, the world burned.

Winter, 1944

Everyone had been on edge recently. New people ran in and ran out, but there was one constant in my life. Sonja.

She never left my side. She could never take the place of Johannes, but she kept me going.

These days, I mostly wandered around the house we stayed at. I didn’t like to go outside anymore. The rotting smell in the air was stronger than ever, and I couldn’t take it. But people were hopeful.

The radio said we were close to winning the war. A while ago, in the summer, some troops landed in France and where headed up this way. People were coming from the East, too.

Here we were, stuck in the middle.

I found my mind wandering to Johannes these days. I looked out the window in Sonja’s and my room. I wondered if Johannes was looking at the sky right now. I found comfort in the fact that he was under the same sky as I was.

“Hey there, Freddie.” I looked to see Sonja walking into our room.

She had a smile on which made me smile. But she also had bags in her hands. My smile was gone.

I got up from the bag and nudged her bags with my nose.

Why? She can’t just go... can she?

“My boy.” Sonja sat on the floor next to me. “Oh, you’re such a good boy.” She pulled me into a hug. “You did such a good job.”

You did, too, Sonja. You did, too.

“I’m so sorry.” Her voice muffled into my fur, “My poor Mama is sick, and I, homesick.” She pulled away, her eyes a little pink. “I wish you could come.”

Sonja didn't need to finish. I knew I wouldn't be. A car came for Sonja, and our room was just mine, now.

I wondered when...

I wondered if I would ever find Johannes again.

If I would see Sonja again.

Truus, Finn, the Van de Kars.

I just don't understand.

Why does everyone I love leave me

Spring, 1945

I remember the day it happened. Liberation. Freedom.

The agents at the house cheered, danced and yelled - all the way till dawn the next day.

Freedom.

For the agents, for my friends.

For Finn and all those where Finn was.

For my family, Johannes and the Van de Kars.

For Truus and Oma.

For Sonja.

And perhaps, freedom for me.

But what was freedom for me?

When could I rejoice like the rest of the world?

Two and a Half Weeks Later

I was traveling once more. This time, back into civilization. The cities, the towns. Homes full of people, families, friends and happy faces.

We got out somewhere crowded.

It was hard to keep up with the people who'd brought me. Before long, I was lost. I couldn't tell which way was which. How funny, I'd never felt so alone around so many people.

I heard some popping noises start up.

BAM. BAM.

What was that? The men with sticks?

No one but me panicked I couldn't stay here.

So, I ran. I ran so far away. I didn't know where I was going. I wasn't going really anywhere.

Just running.

From the fear, from the problems, and from all the pain.

A Little While Later...

I'm not sure when I began to walk, but I had at some point.

I was back in a forest. Back where it all began. But, like with all forests, it looked the same but I knew it was not. Same trees, same bushes, same smell.

Wait a minute.

That smell. I knew that smell, didn't I?

I ran forward. Where was that smell from?

I kept going, until I stopped at a tree. What was so special about this tree?

It had a rope tied around it. A rope that was tied to my collar!

These woods - they were the woods!

So my home, the Van de Kars, they were here. I raced out following the first path I had come on. I searched the air for that familiar smell - there it was!

Down the path, to the street, down the street, to the left, down our street.

I stopped. I was here. I was finally home.

My door. Our door. Our home.

I walked up; the door was locked. I went around back.

The backyard, the stars, those late nights. I needed a smell. I needed anything.

Was anyone here?

What if...

Then that smell - that wonderful smell.

Johannes.

I raced through the small hole in the back door that they'd made for me oh so long ago.

They'd left it open for me. I ran inside, and standing in the hall was Emmaline. I ran up to her and jumped up. Emmaline, Emmaline, Emmaline - I missed you so much!

"Johannes!" Emmaline called out, shoving me off of her. Doesn't she know it's me?

Then, Johannes rushed in, and I ran to him.

My boy, my boy.

“Johannes, whose dog is this?” Emmaline asked, coming over.

Johannes did not answer. He slowly sank down to the floor and met my eyes.

“Leven?”

Yes! Yes! Leven is my name!

I let out a howl.

“Leven!” Johannes wrapped me in his arms, and I felt Emmaline join us as well.

I was home.

Never had such simple words seemed so beautiful.

I was home.

And time seemed to stand still.

Epilogue

I had finally made it home. I made it.

As I sit in our backyard, the day grows old and into night. The stars will come out soon.

The war ended years ago. I live with Johannes now. He is grown, as is Emmaline. And I am much older.

As for Mr., Mrs., and Lina Van de Kar...

I do not know what became of them. I'm not quite sure Emmaline and Johannes do either. But my heart aches for them.

So, now, in my old age, I lie in the grass, Johannes at my side watching the stars.

Each star reminds me of a life I knew.

Lina, Sonja, Finn, Truus.

“Okay, Leven.” Johannes strokes my head, then starts to get up. “Ready to head inside?”

I will. In a moment.

I stare at the sky, and think of everyone I've known. I can't wait to see them again.

It won't be long now.

The sky above looks the same as it did when my, and all, life began.

It's nice to know the stars will never change.

About the book

This book and all of its characters are entirely fictional.

However, all the events that occurred are entirely true.

Leven's story takes place in The Netherlands.

In Spring of 1940, specifically May 10, the colors that illuminated the sky in the book was known as the bombing of Rotterdam, a city in The Netherlands. This was the first city invaded by the Nazis, but it was not the last. Slowly but surely, the Nazis took over The Netherlands.

The Bombing of Rotterdam

The pain and suffering the citizens of The Netherlands went through was horrific and the Nazis performed unspeakable acts.

Such as taking Jewish families from their homes, as the Van de Kars were, and put in Ghettos and Concentration Camps, such as the one that Finn was held in.

It took nearly five years before The Netherlands was liberated on May 5, 1945.

The resistance was also real. There were many real heroes and brave people that fought against the Nazi Propaganda. The character of Sonja Messman was entirely fictional, but she was based off of many real heroes. Namely Resistance fighters Hannie Schaft, Irena Sendler, and the Oversteegan Sisters.

The Resistance

World War II was one of the most important and historic events of all time, and it still affects our lives today.

This book is dedicated to all those who fought against the Nazis in WWII, the persecuted, the survivors, the fallen, and the brave souls who witnessed all that happened in WWII.

We can never forget.