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HANNA
MY
HOLOCAUST
STORY

GOLDIE ALEXANDER

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We knew we were about to be killed. What we didn't understand was why it hadn't happened already. Where were these soldiers taking us?

Huddled in the rear of the German truck, we lurched over rough roads.

My brother Adam crouched on the floor. His eyes were closed. So were Mama's and Papa's. My little sister Ryzia kept up a constant whine.

As I nestled in beside them, my eyes stayed open.

Through a crack in the canvas, I could look outside as we sped to Otwock. The truck didn't stop. Instead we drove through the town and out the other side, pulling up in a birch forest.

It was so cold, the mist so thick, there was so much snow, I could just make out the silhouette of silvery tree trunks against a dismal grey sky.

The soldiers ordered us out of the truck. We were told to

line up. I closed my eyes and waited.

When nothing happened, I opened them again.

An SS officer, a member of Adolf Hitler's most loyal units, got out of the front cabin and strode toward us. He had the classic look of the German ideal Aryan: tall, slim, blond-haired, small-featured, pale blue eyes. His uniform was impeccable; the black belt around his tunic polished, his collar stiff, the silver insignia shining. Around his arm was the red armband bearing the symbol of the Nazis, the swastika. How I hated that crooked cross and what it represented.

The officer's ice-blue eyes regarded us as if we were rats, cockroaches or lice. In some way I couldn't blame him. We were painfully thin. Our clothes were in tatters. We looked just like the "degenerates" the Nazis called us. In the time we were hidden on the farm, Mama's hair had turned grey, and Papa's hair and stubble were quite white.

There would be no pity from that officer's gaze. It finally settled on my father.

He gave Papa the Nazi salute, keeping his right arm straight, raising it halfway, fingers pointed at the sky. "Romek Kaminsky?" His voice was soft, but cold.

Papa nodded.

The officer looked through some papers and said in German, "I have orders to bring you to Warsaw, to the Ghetto."

Papa stared in astonishment before replying in the same language. “Why?”

“It seems you are needed there.”

We had left Warsaw two years ago. We had been hiding from the Nazis ever since in a farmhouse loft. Now it seemed as if it hadn’t done us the least bit of good.

The truck drove into Warsaw, then through Aleje Jerozolimskie Street. I caught sight of “Kaminsky’s Emporium,” the business my family once owned. Though the building had survived the 1939 bombing raids, it looked terrible. All the store windows were covered by boards and every door bolted.

The truck continued along Nowy Swiat Street. As we went past our old house, Mama let out a faint cry. As if to taunt us, the buildings on either side were in ruins, yet our house was intact. The doorstep still edged onto the pavement. The brass door handle, that our housekeeper Elza used to polish so vigorously, still glittered.

I pictured my room with its low ceiling, carved blue headboard and quilted spread, my toys and books on their shelves in the wall opposite, the fringed rug on the polished wooden floor.

Who had been sleeping in my room? What had happened to all the furniture, paintings, books, rugs, silver, and crockery we had left behind? What about Mama’s precious baby grand piano?

Angry blood rushed to my head.

Mama's eyes filled with tears. She'd been so houseproud, so happy with our home and her life as Papa's wife, someone loved and respected by all our relatives and friends.

We drove right through the city heading for the northern suburbs. A high concrete wall topped with broken glass and barbed wire was in front of us. The small entrance to what was behind the wall was heavily guarded. The German sentries waved us through.

We were in the ghetto. The streets were unbelievably crowded and everyone, it seemed, was Jewish. Everyone over the age of ten was branded with a blue Star of David either on a white armband or sewn onto their ragged clothing. Everyone was horribly thin, even thinner than we were, and their eyes were tired. Just like us, all these people had been forced by the Nazis to leave their homes and come here.

"What has happened to them, Papa?" I whispered.

Papa took my hand. "The ghetto is full of infection. Because of the cramped conditions, they're hard to avoid."

"What sort of illness?" Adam asked.

"Tuberculosis, a sickness of the lungs, is spread by coughing and sneezing. It will be everywhere here. Typhus too. It's carried by lice that burrow into your clothes and hair."

Mama held Ryzia closer. "Are there no medicines to cure them?"

"Yes, but they're expensive, and almost impossible to get

inside the ghetto.” Papa sighed. “We must try not to brush against other people.”

I think Papa believed we’d be dead before we had time to get sick. But in that case, why did the Nazis bother bringing us here? Why hadn’t they shot us in the forest?

The truck lurched to a halt, flinging us against its canvas sides.

We heard the front door open.

The canvas at the back of the vehicle was pulled aside. Once my eyes adjusted to the light, I made out the shape of the tall SS officer.

“*Raus!* Out!” he yelled.

Frozen, lips chapped and sore, stiff from sitting in a cramped position for too long and bruised from being thrown around each time the truck cornered, we clambered onto the road.

I didn’t dare glance at Papa. I was so frightened, the butterflies in my stomach refused to lie down. But I refused to show that officer how scared I was. I took a deep breath and tried to stand as if about to tackle a difficult vault in a gymnastic routine.

The officer pulled a sheet of paper out of an upper pocket. Handing it to Papa, he said, “Romek Kaminsky, you have been ordered to attend the Jewish Council as a translator.”

Papa’s chin dropped. “You mean—you brought me here to work?”

“A decree was issued last year establishing this ghetto. You are needed to process the Jews sent here.” The officer gave my father such a disdainful look, Papa took an involuntary step back.

“But . . . but where are we to live?” Mama blurted.

“That is not my concern. The only command I’ve been given is to bring you here.” He gave the Nazi salute, and with a “*Heil Hitler*,” climbed back into the truck.

We stood there trembling. Partly from shock. Mostly with relief. We couldn’t believe it. We were still alive.



“What do we do now?” Mama’s voice was barely audible.

Papa was reading the official piece of paper the SS officer had handed him. He said, “Let’s find this Jewish Council and see what they can do for us.”

He stopped a passerby to ask him where to find it.

“You mean the Jewish Council of Elders?” the man answered, sarcastically. He spoke in Yiddish, the historical language of European Jews. “The Germans call it the *Judenrat*. However, I’m not sure if that council helps or hinders our people.” He pointed to an imposing building a little further down the street. “Try the second floor.” Tipping his hat to Mama, he continued down the street.

Papa, ever cautious, said, "This could be a trap. Best if I go there alone. Wait for me outside the building."

We squatted on the filthy pavement and leant against the wall.

As we sat there, I glanced up and saw three small boys head toward us. They weren't wearing stars, which meant they were less than ten years old. Every Jew older than ten was required by law to wear one. They were grubby and thin, their hair such a vermicelli tangle, their faces so pale, their eyes so shadowed, they made us look half normal.

The tallest looked directly at me. "You. Girl. Whatcha doing here?"

I cleared my throat, swallowed hard and managed, "We just came."

"What's your names?"

I stared at him suspiciously, before asking, "Why do you want to know?"

He stared back unabashed. "Just do!"

It probably wouldn't make any difference to tell him. "I'm Hanna. That's my mama, Adam, my brother, and my little sister Ryzia. She's three."

"How come you're wearing an armband?" He made this sound like an accusation. "You don't look old enough."

"Well, I am," I said wearily. "I'm twelve."

His mouth curled in disbelief. "You're real short. I think you're only eight or nine."

I was too exhausted to bother with this cheeky brat. “I can’t help being short,” I snapped. “You’re not so big yourself.”

“Where you from?” he fired back.

How much should I tell them? But what could they do to us that hadn’t happened already?

I said, “We were living on a farm outside Otwock.” I thought of Elza and Anya, who had hidden us since the war began in 1939.

“So if you were on a farm, how come you’re here?”

“A neighbour turned us in. The people that hid us were shot.” Tears started to build in the corner of my eyes. Before they could fall, I glared up at him. “So, who are you?”

“Me, I’m Karol.” He pointed a filthy finger at his friends. “Those two, Jacob and Moshe. We’re a gang.”

I sniffed in disbelief. Before the war Adam and his best friend Alex always talked about being a gang. As if this boy suspected I wasn’t taking him seriously, he said, “We trade with the Poles and sell back to the Jews, sometimes the other way around.”

I didn’t get to hear more, because just then Papa came out of the building, cheeks flushed with excitement. “Come,” he told Mama. “We have been lucky. They have given me work! So I will earn a few zlotys. Best of all, we have somewhere to live.”

I got to my feet and helped Mama onto hers. She looked so spent, I took Ryzia from her, and the little one snuggled

into my shoulder. When I next looked around, Karol and his friends had vanished into the crowd.

We set off through the streets, passing bundles of rags on the pavement. Only they weren't rags, they were people curled up in balls or leaning against walls.

Many held out a hand begging for food. Why didn't they have food? Didn't they have any money? Wasn't there any food to buy? A little girl, she could have been no more than three years old, looked at us with giant eyes. "Please," she murmured. I felt terrible for her but there was nothing I could do.

Papa led us around the corner along a number of streets until we arrived at Zelazna Street. Here, he kept going until we arrived at a triple-storey house. Maybe once the building had been handsome, but now the facade was cracked, the glass in the windows wore crazy zigzag lines, and the concrete steps leading to the front door seemed ready to collapse.

Papa said, "We are fortunate. The ghetto is so crowded, it's almost impossible to find somewhere to live. Many people have to survive on the streets. But because I am now employed as a translator, we can use two rooms on the second floor. They have even given me money so we can buy food."

Papa took a key out of his pocket and opened the front door. We walked into a narrow passage. Immediately, we were hit by the stink of boiled cabbage, damp and urine. It felt even colder inside than out.

In the corridor a door opened. A woman peered out. Her face was old and wrinkled but her hair was thick and black. It took me a moment to realize she was wearing a *sheitel*, a wig. That told me she was an Orthodox Jew. Papa handed her a piece of paper. She read it through very slowly, grunted and gave him a grudging smile. “Up there,” she told him. “First floor, praise *HaShem* . . . praise God. Your rooms are at the front.” She went back inside slamming the door behind her.

The rooms were empty, apart from a chamber pot. The floorboards were as bare as the dirty walls.

Papa picked up the chamber pot and placed it in the passage.

I never thought I could miss our cramped hiding space in the farm loft. But I did.



Mama settled Ryzia on the floor and lay down next to her, curling her body around the toddler in an attempt to share warmth and comfort.

Papa stared through the murky glass in the window. “I’ll see if I can find us food and blankets.”

I struggled onto my feet. “Can I come? I’ll help carry them.”

Papa considered it. “Yes, Hanna, you’re to come with me.

Adam, you're to stay here and look after Mama and Ryzia."

Adam nodded at Papa and, holding his left arm up from the elbow, he waggled his right fist across it. He was playing his imaginary violin, something he did all the time.

Back on the street, I said, "Papa, where do we go?"

"I'm told there's a market close by. Tomorrow I will return to buy furniture. I have enough money to make us more comfortable."

I followed him. We went down Zielna Street and then made several turns, all the time forced to dodge people flocking along the pavements. All the Jews, a third of the original population of Warsaw, had been sent to this tiny area in the city. Others had been sent here from the provinces.

A car bearing the Nazi flag drove past almost running over several men. Though they jumped aside just in time, their bodies moved heavily and slowly.

"That car must belong to Jozef Szerynski," Papa said, "a Jew who has turned against us. He's in charge of the Jewish Police Force."

"A *Jewish* police force." My eyebrows shot up. "Why do we need that?"

"Given the conditions we have been left with, I suppose the Germans are hoping we'll kill each other and save them the trouble."

"Do they have to wear uniforms?"

"No, but they have their own armband, to identify them.

They also carry a rubber club attached to their belts and are given a bigger food ration. Seems,” Papa dryly added, “they have total permission to order us around.”

By then we had arrived at the market. Everywhere I looked, people were selling and buying food, clothing, furniture, paintings, crockery, silverware and goodness knows what else. It seemed as if anything and everything was for sale.

Papa bought a small loaf of rye bread, a wedge of cheese, a pickled herring, a jar of fat, a small quantity of black sump oil, and sweets that tasted like sugar but turned out to be mostly molasses and saccharin.

We also needed blankets. We only had the clothes we wore. Though it was early spring, there was still snow on the ground and it was desperately cold.

Papa strode toward a man holding up a blanket. I galloped after him.

Papa examined the blankets before looking at the man selling them. He gave an astonished cry. “Isaac?”

Pan Isaac, an old friend of Papa’s, had once been a respected and wealthy banker. He took a few moments to recognize my father, they had both changed so much.

“Romek, my friend . . .” Tears dripped into Isaac’s beard. “That we have come to this.”

“Yes,” Papa said with a sigh. He remained silent a moment, as if he knew no words that could express what he

was feeling. Then he remembered why we were here. “How much do you want for those blankets?”

“My friend, what can you give me? My wife and children, we have no food. Nothing to eat . . . nothing. I am selling what little we have left.”

“I can give you all I have,” said Papa emptying his pockets.

“That’s too much,” Pan Isaac protested. “You must keep these zlotys for another day.”

But Papa pressed the money into his old friend’s hand saying, “I am to be employed by the Jewish Council and they will pay me enough to keep us alive.”

Isaac embraced Papa and both men wept.

I watched the men silently crying. I remembered Papa and Pan Isaac together, as the men they used to be, two years previously, the day the war began . . .

1939

Our building edged onto a busy street. It was one of Warsaw's historic thoroughfares, full of shops, restaurants and fine houses. In the rattle of passing cars, trams, horses and carts, no one heard me come in. I was upset about missing my regular gymnastic class because of a sore throat and blocked nose. I had never missed a class before.

Passing the door to Papa's study, I heard the unmistakable sound of an argument. I recognized my father's voice and that of his friend, Pan Isaac. I knew Zaida, my grandfather, was home too, because his ebony-handled umbrella was in the hallstand and he never went out without it.

"You think," Papa was shouting, "that we are safe?"

My father wasn't usually home on a Tuesday afternoon. For several generations our family had been the proud owners of Kaminskys' Emporium in the heart of the city, and Papa spent long days there. He claimed that we mightn't own the biggest clothing store in Warsaw, but it was certainly the best.

Pan Isaac said something that I couldn't hear, other than the word "*Kristallnacht*." I froze. *Kristallnacht*, "crystal night"—the night of the broken glass—was the name given to the night in November last year when Jewish people and their businesses, hospitals, schools and synagogues were attacked in Germany and Austria. It wasn't only Nazi soldiers that did it. Ordinary people had joined in too. Even though Mama and Papa had tried to prevent me and Adam hearing too much about it on the radio, or seeing photographs in the newspapers, I knew enough for the word to send shivers through me.

I knelt close to the keyhole and listened more carefully.

"Look at what's happened in Berlin!" Papa still sounded furious. "Tens of thousands of Jews were arrested. What makes you think it won't be the same here?"

Zaida's voice rose. "But Romek, a third of this city is Jewish." I pictured his goatee beard waggling, his eyeglass falling onto his waistcoat like it always does when he's upset. "There's no way they can put a third of the city in prison."

"No?" Papa still sounded angry. "Don't be so sure. The Nazis are noted for their efficiency."

"So! What should we do?"

"I kept telling you we should have left. Now it's probably too late. At least we should be sending money to Switzerland."

"I think that would be wise," said Pan Isaac. Until recently he had been a successful banker. But the bans against Jews in

Germany had affected his bank as well, and he was no longer allowed to work there.

“Right now we need all our money to bring in more stock,” Zaida insisted.

“Maybe.” A long pause before Papa added, “Still, as a precaution, I think we must hide money somewhere in this house.”

“I’m sure that isn’t necessary,” Zaida said crossly.

“The German army has already taken over Austria, and parts of the Czechoslovak Republic,” Pan Isaac reminded him. “Germany has made it clear that Poland will be next. There are people in the streets demonstrating against Germany’s plans.”

“But Britain and France are friends of Poland. They have promised to defend us if we should need it,” Zaida insisted. “Surely, that will stop Hitler.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. And without their help, our cavalry will never stand up to the Nazi’s armoured tanks.”

Lately, the streets of Warsaw had been filled with uniformed soldiers wearing flowing capes and polished knee-high boots. They were so handsome that Adam, my seven-year-old brother, dreamt one day of joining the Polish cavalry.

I strained to hear more through the keyhole, but the men’s voices had died down to a murmur.

Instead, I went into the kitchen where I found Mama and

Elza preparing supper. Even with my blocked nose I could smell chocolate, cinnamon and other spices.

My baby sister Ryzia was on the floor playing with her favourite teddy bear. Mama looked up as I came in. “Hannale, why are you home this early? Don’t you have a gymnastic class?”

I pulled out a hankie and blew my nose. “Panna Margrete said my cold was too bad, so she sent me home.”

“Drink some tea, and help yourself to some cake. That might make you feel better,” Mama suggested. “And there is a parcel on the table for you. It’s from Nanna Goldberg.”

I had turned eleven the week before, so I knew it must be my birthday present. Mama’s parents, the Goldbergs, had moved to Paris three years ago. They always sent me wonderful presents: perfume, silk scarves and lots of books.

I didn’t miss Mama’s parents all that much. Nanna Goldberg was amazingly critical. She never approved of Mama not employing a German governess to teach us “language and proper behaviour.” Nanna thought everything German was “high class”—their language, culture, literature, music—and she looked down on everything else. When I asked Mama why her parents hadn’t gone to Berlin where Nanna might surely have been happier, she told me her father did most of his business with France. He bought hats from famous designers and sold them on to the wealthy women of Warsaw.

I opened the present. There were three books and some soft, grey leather gloves. I held them against my cheek as I looked at the books. They were in French, a language I didn't study. I was surprised they weren't in German.

As much as I loved the gloves, and Elza's chocolate and cinnamon babka, they were a poor consolation for missing my class. I loved gymnastics. I'd mastered sprinting down a runway, vaulting from a springboard over a wooden horse, and landing on both feet with arms raised. On the beam, I could run, skip and do forward and backward circles. Hanging from a bar with both hands, then only one, I could swing into different positions and loop over the bar. On the mat, I was able to manage complicated somersaults and spins.

Panna Margrete, my gymnastic teacher, often said, "Hanna, you have the ideal proportions for a gymnast. With more practice you will be good enough to enter some competitions." I was still only four-feet-nine and weighed eighty-five pounds. I looked a lot like Mama, though she was four inches taller. Our faces were upside-down triangles: we both had wide cheekbones and pointy chins, full lips, and dark hair. I really hated my hair as I could never coax it into a proper pageboy style, no matter how much I brushed it.

Papa was tall and stout, with thick, strong dark-brown hair that sprang from his scalp like it had a life all its own, the same hair I inherited. He had charcoal eyes, a strong nose, full lips, and a bristly moustache that prickled when he kissed

me. Like Zaida, he was always impeccably turned out. He'd say, "How can I sell Kaminskys' clothes, if I'm not equally well dressed?"

My brother Adam was tall for seven and promised to be quite handsome when he grew up. He had fairer hair than the rest of us, hazel eyes and small features. Right now he was quite thin, but he was strong and wiry . . . I knew how strong he was because whenever we wrestled it was hard to beat him.

Ryzia was only ten months old and she took after Papa. She had the same thick dark hair, dark eyes, chubby pink cheeks, a dimpled chin, and a rosebud mouth.

Right now she was holding out her arms to be picked up.

I did and settled her on my hip.

Mama and Elza were cooking chicken soup with dumplings. As I watched Elza stir the pot, my mouth watered at the heavenly smell.

Elza was our housekeeper. Taller and sturdier than Mama, with a mole on her right cheek like a squashed raisin, she thought nothing of doing a hard day's cleaning, washing, helping Mama prepare dinner, and then spending hours playing with us. I loved the way the skin around her pale blue eyes crinkled when she gave us her abrupt laugh. Mama was very fond of her. I think their friendship was unusual, as other families we knew frequently changed housekeepers.

I had known Elza since I was a baby. I knew she regarded

us children almost as her own and would do anything in her power to protect us. She was the best person I knew. A real mensch.

Elza grew up in a farm not far from Otwock, twenty-four kilometres southeast of Warsaw, where she had to feed the cows, pigs and chickens, carry buckets of water and firewood into the house, and help out in the fields. No wonder she ran away. I think her parents had been unkind to her, because she often said, her eyes watering with emotion, “You Kaminskys are my family now.”

Before we left for upstairs, Elza slipped me two homemade cookies. Clutching the biscuits and with Ryzia on my hip, I set off, Mama calling after us, “Don’t get the baby too excited. It’s almost time for her bath and supper.”



Like many three-storey buildings in Nowy Swiat Street, ours had a cellar where we stored anything we didn’t use. At the front of the house was Papa’s study, the dining room and parlour with its armchairs, sofas, small and large tables. An elaborately carved silver samovar sat on the largest dresser. This samovar was only used when Mama held an “English” afternoon tea where the most delicate sandwiches and delicious cakes were served. Me and Adam always looked

forward to these as we got all the leftovers. When grown-ups drank tea brewed in that samovar, it was usually served weak and black, sipped with a cube of sugar or with a cherry or strawberry jam called varenyi.

In the furthest corner sat a baby grand piano. Though I took weekly lessons from Pan Schmidt, I was no natural musician. However, Mama performed well enough to give small recitals, and Adam had only to hear a melody to play it on his violin. Pan Schmidt claimed he was a “child prodigy.”

We each had our own bedroom. Plus there were two bathrooms: one for Papa and Mama, the other for the rest of the family. Right at the back of the house was the kitchen and laundry. Behind the laundry was the small room where Elza slept.

I peered into Adam’s room. He was on his bed reading and didn’t see me. He had stayed home from school with a cold, which he’d obviously gifted to me. Then I took Ryzia into hers. We had just settled on the floor with her wooden blocks when I heard a loud thud, then another, then another, each louder than the last.

My heart leapt into my mouth. My heart thumped against my ribs.

It took me a long moment to realize what was happening.

Bombs!

Warsaw was being bombed.

Sirens began to wail.

There was so much noise, I trembled and Ryzia burst into tears. As I tried to soothe her, Mama raced up the stairs calling for us to run down to the cellar. Papa, Zaida and Pan Isaac followed us. We could smell the smoke filling the streets. "Hurry! Hurry!" Papa urged.

Most Warsaw houses were built to withstand the long, cold, dark winters. Roofs were steeply pitched so snow could easily slide off, and there was often a crane to help lift heavy furniture to upper floors. Windows were small, set inside thick triple-brick walls, surrounded by embrasures, and double-glazed. One window swung in, one swung out; this to keep out the intense cold of winter. Each apartment had its own metal cast-iron heaters fuelled with coal or coke, and covered in polished tiles. The wealthier the house, the more elaborate these were. Floors consisted of wide strips of polished blond wood covered with patterned rugs and carpets to provide extra warmth.

Every street corner in Warsaw had a café where writers, musicians and artists used to meet because many of them could only afford to live in tiny, badly heated rooms.

Crouched in the cellar, I thought of our beautiful city and what must be happening to it. When I couldn't bear to think this way anymore, I closed my eyes and clutched Zaida's hands. Zaida had come to live with us when my bubba, his wife, died. Whenever I was in trouble, or hurt myself, he was always the first to comfort me. He was never shy about showing how much he loved his grandchildren.

Only this afternoon Papa had been warning Zaida of the German threat to Poland. Now the Luftwaffe's bombs had succeeded in convincing us that all was about to change.



Next morning I asked Mama if I could go to my best friend Eva Lublinski's house. I was worried that she and her family might be hurt. Mama had tried phoning them, but the line was dead.

Mama shook her head. "It's not safe. I can't let you wander the streets, or even go to school. Not until we know what is happening. I don't want to let you, or Adam and Ryzia, out of my sight."

Over the next few days we spent a lot of time in the cellar. It was early September and, thankfully, still quite warm. We filled wooden boxes with tins of food, bottles of water, candles, and other essentials. I took some of my favourite books and a pack of cards. Whenever things got me down I played Patience. One of Grandma Goldberg's presents was a tiny pack of cards that fitted inside my pocket. Concentrating on a game helped me stay calm.

Mama and Papa and Zaida talked together in hushed voices about what they thought was happening. As I wanted to know, I listened as hard as I could. Mama kept saying, "We

should have gone to my parents' in Paris."

Papa shrugged, "Too late now."

Just as they promised, Britain and France declared war on Germany in response to the Nazis' invasion of Poland. Hearing this came as a relief. Britain and France had helped to defeat Germany in the last war, twenty years ago. Maybe that would happen again?

"Germany is a different country now though," Papa warned. "Hitler has been building up his forces for years. And the German people's devotion to him is beyond measure. We've all seen the way millions turn out to his rallies and just to see him in the streets. But the Nazis aren't an army plucked from the people at the last moment like ours. They're highly trained professionals.

"I still find it hard to understand why those Berlin Jews admired Hitler's new order," Papa went on. "Didn't they listen to what he was saying? It took *Kristallnacht* for this to really sink in. Shops smashed, people attacked and deported to prison camps. The Nazis made no pretence as to what they hoped to achieve."

Though Zaida couldn't argue with this, he kept insisting, "In the end they can't win. The final triumph must always go to a just cause."

When the planes came at night we stayed awake listening to them circle the skies above our city.

"Why do they fly around like that?" Adam asked.

“They’re getting their bearings,” he explained.

Then the bombs began to drop.

Things began to get worse. And quickly. The only way we knew what was going on was from what we heard over the wireless. These broadcasts informed us that German armoured units had reached Wola, an area in the west of the city, and that the Polish navy, which had been anchored at Gdynia, had taken refuge at a British naval base.

Papa was told he had to join the Polish forces for compulsory military training in the east. All able-bodied men were conscripted to try to keep the Germans out. Papa had to leave without delay. Over one hundred thousand Polish soldiers were ready to defend our city.

We listened to the wireless almost non-stop. We cheered when we heard our army had stopped the German advance. We were so thrilled—and so proud of Papa, fighting to protect Poland.

Then the news changed. Our city was under siege. The Germans were surrounding Warsaw.

We spent days and nights in the cellar. The air raids and the shelling from heavy artillery guns didn’t stop. We could hear high-pitched bursts of gunfire repeating in the distance: “Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack, ack-ack-ack-ack-aack.”

I asked, “What’s that sound, Mama?”

“Anti-aircraft guns,” Adam answered for her.

Elza fretted about food. She insisted on leaving the cellar

to get provisions from the kitchen.

“No, Elza,” Mama protested. “It’s just not safe.”

“It’s no use sitting here to slowly starve,” Elza argued. “I’d rather take the risk of a bomb falling on my head.”

“Let me go, Mama,” I begged. “I’m quick.”

Mama shook her head very fiercely.

“No,” Elza declared. “It’s my job to look after you, and I won’t let a few Nazis let us go hungry.” Without another word, she disappeared up the cellar steps.

She returned soon after carrying some bread and cheese. “There’s dust and ash everywhere,” she reported. “But otherwise nothing a broom won’t fix.”

I wasn’t sure if our neighbours had been as lucky.

After the bombing didn’t let up for more than a week, Elza insisted that she must go to check the state of the city.

The wait for her to come back seemed endless. It was only an hour or so, but as every minute ticked by, we hoped and prayed she was safe. We could hear planes droning overhead and bombs falling.

Just as we were starting to lose hope, she emerged at the top of the stairs. Her face was grim as she reported what she’d seen. “There’s piles of rubble everywhere, buildings gone, and worse. Two houses at the end of northern end have gone, and the houses on either side of us are damaged.”

“Oh, no,” Mama cried. “The Balinskis?”

Elza nodded sadly. “I saw young Dominik. The family are

all right, they are staying with Mr. Balinski's sister. Dominik and his father are working as volunteers, putting out fires. They are desperate for help."

"I could do that, Mama!" Adam cried.

"No," Mama said firmly. "You're too young."

Adam looked disappointed.

A few days later Elza ventured out again. We had almost run out of water and the taps no longer worked. I don't know what we could have done without Elza. She had become our lifeline.

She returned holding a half full bucket and saying, "This is all I could find. Then she grimly added, "The Nazis have destroyed all the waterworks."

"Then we will have to make do," I said decisively. "Won't we, Mama?"

Mama didn't answer. But Zaida did. "Yes, we will."



The fighting went on throughout September. On the 28th, the word spread that Poland had surrendered. We had no idea what would happen next, or where Papa was. Three days later, there was an urgent knock on the door.

"I'll go," Zaida said.

As the door opened we saw Papa—his face grey with

exhaustion, his hat, coat and boots covered in grime, but he was all in one piece. We were so relieved to see him, we couldn't stop crying. Even Zaida's tears ran into his beard.

Papa looked at us amazed, then said, "Don't tell me you're crying because I came home?"

We couldn't stop hugging him.

"What happened to you?" Mama cried.

"Yes," Zaida echoed. "Tell us everything."

Papa sank onto a chair and looked around as if he couldn't believe where he was. "The German army surrounded the city," Papa explained. "The Luftwaffe bombarded not just us, but strategic targets—barracks, factories, hospitals. They got the waterworks too."

We all nodded. "Elza told us," Mama said.

"We fought the best we could, but the Polish army was hopelessly outnumbered. And the Russian army was advancing from the east. We didn't stand a chance, especially given the state of the city, and we knew it. We would have to surrender. Once we realized this, we started to hide some of our weapons and ammunition. Maybe we will get a chance to use them to fight back again. I hope so."

"But we heard that most of the Army has been taken prisoner. How did you escape?" Mama wanted to know.

Papa smiled grimly. "Hiding behind a bombed-out building. I waited a long time before I dared think it safe to come home."

“Thank God,” Mama whispered. “We thought we’d never see you again.”

