

A STRUGGLE FOR HOPE

CAROL MATAS

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Scholastic Canada Ltd.
Toronto New York London Auckland Sydney
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Scholastic Inc.
557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, USA

Scholastic Australia Pty Limited
PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

Scholastic New Zealand Limited
Private Bag 94407, Botany, Manukau 2163, New Zealand

Scholastic Children's Books
Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1DB, UK

www.scholastic.ca

*For my grandchild, Meira Ana Brask,
with love, Tata*

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: A struggle for hope / Carol Matas ; cover by Nadia So.

Names: Matas, Carol, 1949- author. | So, Nadia, illustrator.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20210238666 | Canadiana (ebook) 20210238704 |

ISBN 9781443133432 (softcover) | ISBN 9781443133449 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS8576.A7994 S77 2021 | DDC jC813/.54—dc23

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6 5 4 3 2 1 Printed in Canada 114 21 22 23 24 25

SO SIMPLE, SO CLEAR

*Love your neighbour as yourself
What is hateful to you do not do
to your fellow
Like this we are meant to live
together
Whether a message from
above or advice from Hillel
it is so simple, so clear
yet we keep missing
the mark in this regard
It is so simple, so clear
that until the day we live it
many will die, more will suffer
and when my fellow suffers
there will be no peace, no
happiness for either of us
it is so simple, so clear
and almost too hard*

— Per Brask

PART ONE
Israel

CHAPTER *One*

Kibbutz David, Israel — May 1948

“Jews out! Jews out!”

“Murdering Jews! Child killers!” they shout in Polish.

The mob has surrounded the house. I peer out the window. They are carrying clubs, bricks and sticks, and waving long knives.

“But you are the murderers,” I want to shout. “You are the child killers.” Instead, I draw back from the window and search for somewhere we can hide. There are hundreds of them and only a dozen of us.

“Wake up!”

Is this a dream? In that case, I want to wake up.

But suddenly I am in my garden in the kibbutz.

I can hear a voice from far away.

“The children are scared.”

“They need a story, Ruth.”

“Wake up.”

But now I *don't* want to wake up. I am safe here in my

garden, which is brimming with roses and bougainvillea. It is not a practical garden for vegetables and such, but a garden made for its beauty — to soothe and to give joy. I am immersed in that joy as I stand, spade in hand, the sun beating down on me, the desert turning to vibrant colours from my work.

“Wake up!”

My eyes fly open and for a dreadful moment I don’t know where I am. My heart starts to pound and I begin to tremble. Then I remember Morris’s words. “When this happens you must ground yourself. Ask and answer a few simple questions.”

Question: *Where am I?*

I look around.

Answer: *The dining hall in Kibbutz David.*

Question: *What time is it?*

Answer: *Night. It is dark.*

Question: *Who is with you?*

Answer: *Simon is beside me, shaking me, saying, “Are you awake?”*

I stop shivering and take a deep breath. It is all right. I am safe — for the moment. I am not in Kielce in the middle of a pogrom. I am not even in my garden. It was a dream. I say a silent thank you to Morris, the

psychiatrist here at the kibbutz, for helping me navigate these terrifying episodes.

I can hear the children crying, though. They are frightened. And with good reason.

The lights are off in the dining room, the non-fighters dozing beside the children. Our fighters are trying to catch some sleep in their quarters, except for those on guard duty. The battle today was terrible. We lost over a dozen of our fellow kibbutzniks. Arab soldiers who want us dead surround us on all sides. We are waiting for reinforcements, but so far none have arrived. Soon we might have to evacuate the women and children — that is, the women who aren’t part of the fighting force. And as a kibbutz, a community that does everything together — eat, work in the fields, even raise the children — what happens to one of us happens to each of us.

Simon speaks quietly. “I’m sorry to wake you, Ruth. But the children need help. And I know you can do something.” He makes a suggestion: “Tell them our story.”

“I’ve told it a dozen times!” I object.

“It doesn’t matter if you tell it a hundred,” he answers, a slight smile on his face. “They love it. And it gives them hope.” He pauses. “Takes their minds off the fact we

could all be blown up or gunned down at any second.”

I nod. He should be asleep but instead he sits here beside me. He won't say it but I know why. If it is to be our last night on earth he would rather spend it with his sister than asleep. He would also like to be with his girlfriend, Rivka, of course, but she is off somewhere using her expertise in explosives in some top-secret Haganah operation.

Simon keeps telling me that he's determined it won't be our last night on earth because he refuses to miss another of my birthdays and I have one coming soon. Then he teases me, “If only you would act like *almost* seventeen.” And I have to shush him because everyone thinks I am much older. I have been lying about my age since the concentration camps. I lied then to stay alive. I lied when I made the trip to Palestine so I could help lead the children, and then I lied some more when I arrived so I would be allowed to join the fight. Almost as soon as we arrived at the kibbutz, Simon and Zvi and I and the others who travelled with us joined the Haganah, the underground Jewish defence force. In fact, we went even further and became members of the Palmach, known as the crack fighters of the Haganah. And I became second in command of our unit. Which makes no sense since I

hate fighting, but what was the alternative? I could not sit by and let others fight for me.

“Would anyone like to hear the story of me and Simon?” I ask.

“Yes, yes, ken, ken,” the children answer in chorus. Even the ones I thought were asleep sit up.

“Good idea, Ruth,” says Aviva, who is sitting near me with her daughter, Batya.

I begin.

“After the war, I left the displaced persons camp in Germany and went back to my country, Poland. I searched everywhere for even one member of my family but could find no one. I made my way to my uncle Moishe's house — the last house we lived in before being sent to the ghetto. The maid who used to work for us answered the door. She was living in that house, and she was wearing my mother's pearls and the black dress my mother reserved for Shabbat. She said to me, ‘I thought you were all dead.’ After that, everywhere I went I met only hatred. I became very, very sad. It seemed that the maid was right and my family were all dead. And then one day, as I was sitting all alone on the steps of the city hall, after another fruitless search for my family, I heard a voice. And the voice said—”

And here all the young children chime in together and say, “Amcha.”

“Yes.” I nod to the children. “Amcha’ — your people, the Jewish people. And Saul, because that’s who it was, took me to my people and asked me to help Jewish children escape Poland and travel here to Palestine. He himself had travelled all the way from right here, where he was born, to Poland to find those who had lost everyone and everything, like me.

“I didn’t care what I did at that point, because I was all alone, so I said yes. But before we could even leave Poland we were trapped by a mob who hated Jews and who tried to kill us because we were Jews. So it was clear we had to leave.”

I give an involuntary shudder as the vivid dream comes back to me. Not so much a dream as a memory.

“It was a very dangerous trip,” I continue, “because it was illegal and we had to cross many borders and were always at risk of being caught and sent back. Back to the displaced persons camps because there was nowhere that wanted us.”

“Tell us about the boat!” Dan demands.

“No, no, tell about the long walk and all the escapes and—” says Ilse.

“The boat!” Dan repeats.

“I promise I will tell about the walk another time,” I say to Ilse. I think Dan is right. Tonight is a night when even listening to a story cannot completely take away the terror. The story needs to be shortened.

“We walked a long, long way each night through many different countries. We didn’t have identity papers or permission to cross, so we had to sneak across the borders. We met some bad people and had some near misses,” I continue, “but at last we made it to Italy, where we sneaked aboard a boat in the dead of night. We had to stay hidden in the hold until we were well out to sea. Finally we were able to go up onto the deck. I stood there in the sun gulping in the fresh air — and that’s when I heard it. The voice. The voice of . . . my brother.”

“Your brother!” the children repeat.

“And I turned and there he was, standing on the deck, arguing with someone — as usual.” I pause. “Simon.”

The children sigh with happiness.

“And I said, ‘Simon?’ And he said, ‘Ruth?’ And we moved toward each other and touched each other’s faces and realized that we were not alone, that we had found each other!”

The children all clap.

“And then you danced the hora,” Abe says.

“We did,” I affirm.

“And you look almost like twins,” Abe adds, “so everyone could see you were brother and sister.”

“But I was much, much taller,” Simon says.

“You were,” I concede, “but I have caught up.”

It’s true that we are very alike — same black curly hair, his cut short now, mine long and constantly out of control, same blue eyes, from our father. Simon was almost six feet tall when we met on the boat and I was much shorter but I have grown. All that good kibbutz food and the sun in the garden has made me grow like one of my plants.

“And she is now a very annoying younger sister who never listens to her older brother,” Simon says.

Especially, I think, about my boyfriend, since all the two of them ever do is argue.

I gaze down at Zvi, who is sleeping beside me, and gently remove a strand of his thick dark hair which, as usual, is stuck in his small round glasses. It always happens when he sleeps. And he is exhausted now after a day of guard duty. Zvi knows the story well, though. After all, he was there. Like me, he was helping smuggle children from Poland to Palestine. Since then, the only time we

have been apart is when he was in the hospital for his legs and I could not be with him because I was fighting with our Palmach unit. That was not an official war like this one. That was not army against army; it was Arab against Jew and it got worse after the United Nations’ decision to partition Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state. Then just over a week ago, Ben-Gurion, our leader, declared Israel to be a new state. What a day that was! Now we have a country, Israel, but we are still fighting. This time, though, we are fighting entire armies from five of the surrounding Arab countries. They immediately declared war on the new Jewish state. I helped bring children here so they could be safe. But now they are not.

“Batya? Batya?” Aviva sounds worried. “Batya!”

Batya is a feisty five-year-old who has taken to trailing me around all day asking question after question. Before the siege I allowed her to follow me into my garden and to help me pull weeds — well, sometimes she pulled flowers! — and to dig in the dirt. She has curly blond hair and sea-blue eyes but by day’s end she has hair the colour of the soil and a face to match.

There is no answer. We cannot turn on the lights because doing so will give the army that surrounds us a target. I have a flashlight, though, and so do others,

and soon lights are flashing around the dining hall and everyone is calling Batya's name. I leap up.

"I'll go look for her."

Zvi pushes himself up. "Me too." He can actually move pretty quickly now, even though he is still limping. Limping is progress considering he stepped on a landmine and he is lucky to still have his legs.

Aviva pushes ahead of me and the other women who have joined the search. Simon says he will stay to watch the children. We follow Aviva into the hallway, but she is so frantic she can't think straight so I instruct everyone where to look — offices, the kitchen, and so on. I head for the small broom closet where I know Batya likes to hide. It is empty. No one can find her. It doesn't take long for us to realize that she's not in the building. That's when the thought comes to me.

"The garden," I say, my heart sinking.

And then a shot rings out, and another.

Before anyone can stop me I am running as fast as I can. There is a side door that reaches the garden. I bolt through it. I know my way so well it doesn't matter that the only light is from the moon and the stars. I take little steps, turning down the dirt path, and that's when I hear her crying. I follow the sound and when I reach her I

take out my flashlight and shine it on her. All I can see is blood. Everywhere. The enemy must have seen movement and fired. Her little body is limp. More shots ring out and I hear a bullet hit a nearby tree. I bend down, lift Batya in my arms and run to the doorway, where I am met by Aviva and the others.

"No, no, no, no," is all Aviva can say.

We put Batya down gently and use our flashlights to get a better view of her injuries.

"Little Batya, Ima is here, Ima is here," Aviva says.

Gently, I lift her shirt. She has been shot in the stomach. It is bad. I know it is bad. She has only one hope. Surgery. Hospital.

"We need to get her to the hospital," I say. "Zvi, you drive. I can hold Batya, and Aviva can carry a gun. We will probably need it. We have to get her to Tel Aviv."

There is no discussion or argument. I am second-in-command only to Nate. What I say goes in our Palmach unit, and they won't miss us anyway. Zvi is still recovering, and my arm is too weak to hold and aim a rifle properly — damage done by a bullet on the day independence was declared and the war began. But this . . . this I can do.

We have to get out of here though. A siege is called a siege for a reason — no one gets in and no one gets out.

But we have our ways. We know a small trail that leads behind a hill where we keep two jeeps parked just in case. Nate himself used one the other day to go to Jerusalem and plead our case for reinforcements with the higher-ups. He got there and back with their fighters having no idea. That's what we will do now.

I grab my knapsack from the dining room. It is always packed and ready to go for emergencies. In it there is water, food, bandages, clothes. Zvi grabs his. When I see Simon I tell him the situation. He only says, "Be safe."

"You too."

I hug him and then go back to the hallway. Aviva has wrapped bandages around Batya's stomach to staunch the bleeding. I pick her up. Aviva slings a rifle over her shoulder. Zvi leads the way. Quietly we head out the back door and make for the jeep. The guns that surround us are silent. We reach the jeep and get in. I hold my breath when Zvi turns the ignition, but again, no gunfire. Slowly we inch away from the kibbutz and bounce over the rutted road. Batya cries out.

"Shhh, little darling," I whisper. "We are going somewhere safe where they will take away your pain. Shhh. Your ima is here. I am here. You are safe. You are safe."