

# TRAJECTORY

CAMBRIA GORDON

300 meters



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**“He Wears a Pair of Silver Wings”**

Words and Music by Michael Carr and Eric Maschwitz

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# I.

## May 1942

I used to think that only Catholics could have guardian angels. Then my uncle Herman told me that Jews believe in them, too. I decided that mine would be Eleanor Roosevelt, for reasons way beyond our shared name.

Unfortunately, she has yet to show up.

“Eleanor, can you season the chicken?” calls Mom. She pokes her head into the study, where I’m arranged in my usual spot: sitting on the love seat, pretending to read a magazine. Today it’s an issue of *Life*. One of Dad’s math textbooks is hidden behind the pages so that anyone looking at me from the outside would think I was reading about summer playclothes instead of doing calculus.

Mom continues. “I can’t be expected to cook the whole Shabbos meal by myself”—I whisper this last part with her—“after being on my feet all day.” It’s her refrain every Friday evening.

When she leaves, I lay the magazine on the small coffee table and replace the math book on the shelf. Tangent vectors will have to wait. Then I follow her into the kitchen.

Near Mom's feet, my younger sister, Sarah, sits on the floor with a screwdriver and rusty baby carriage.

"Why can't *she* season the chicken?" I ask, annoyed.

"Because I'm earning money," says Sarah. "The government is paying for scrap metal. This old thing might become a hand grenade."

"Season it generously," Mom tells me. "God knows it cost me enough ration stamps." She chops carrots lickety-split, then starts to measure out the rice. "You need to find a way to show your patriotism, Eleanor. You're seventeen, for heaven's sake. Your sister is only twelve."

"She's too timid to do anything," pipes in Sarah.

"That's not true," I say. Even though it is.

When Eleanor Roosevelt was young, she was painfully shy and felt like an ugly duckling. I've been told I look like Maxene, the middle singer of the Andrews Sisters, so I don't think I'm an ugly duckling, but like a young E.R., I prefer to go unnoticed. Somehow she managed to overcome those obstacles, become the First Lady, and use her voice to fight against injustice. I guess I keep hoping that, short of showing up on my doorstep, E.R. will send me a sign that I, too, have a powerful woman inside me.

I hear the *thump drag, thump drag* of Dad's cane and bum leg coming down the stairs, reminding me of yet another connection I have to Eleanor Roosevelt. We both love men who are disabled. I pull out Dad's special chair at the dining table, the one with the higher

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cushion so he can get up from it easily. I give him a kiss on the cheek, stick a straw in his water glass, and go back to dinner prep.

A half hour later the doorbell rings. Aunt Jona swoops in to hug me like a diving pelican, squeezing my ribs against the pillow of her breasts. Uncle Herman goes straight to the liquor, and cousins Jacob and Lila, seven-year-old twins, duck under their mother's arm and run inside. They make a beeline for the radio. *The Lone Ranger* is just beginning.

"Hi-yo Silver, away!" squeals Jacob, galloping with his sister, making a loop of the downstairs area, through the kitchen and into the study, where he and Lila crash into a side table, causing a lamp to teeter. I get there just in time to prevent a disaster. Dad's study is a sacred space for me. Besides doubling as my secret math hideout, it's also where his typewriter lives, the same page yellowing in the cartridge from his unfinished book on transcendental numbers. After a line, he gets tired and falls asleep. I don't think his sentences make sense anyway.

We light the Shabbos candles and say the blessings. The chicken is roasted perfectly, the rice has soaked up all the juice, and our victory garden carrots taste like candy. Everyone's talking at once. I'm quiet, which is not unusual, but all the more noticeable in this boisterous family of ours. Uncle Herman tells a joke about an old man who goes to the doctor because he can't pee. The doctor asks how old he is. The man says ninety-three. The doctor says, You've peed enough.

“New fr Pol?” asks Dad.

“Dad wants to know the news from Poland,” I say. This is how I usually participate in dinner conversations. Translating Dad’s slurred speech.

Uncle Herman hears all the gossip from his Polonia Society meetings. Even though most of the members are Catholic, the Poles stick together here in Philly—many of them live in row houses on Manayunk Avenue, like my aunt and uncle. Unlike Mom, who married a third-generation American Jew and moved to the suburbs as fast as she could, her brother Herman is still tethered to the old country.

“Shreklekh,” he answers in Yiddish. “Terrible.”

“Azriel, Roza, and Batja?” asks Mom, her voice fading, not wanting to ask the real question: Are they alive?

Uncle Herman shrugs. “God only knows.” He looks at me. “Have you received anything, shayna maidel?”

“Not in months,” I answer.

My cousin Batja and I have been writing letters to each other since my fourth-grade teacher wanted us to know there was a world beyond Jenkintown, our little suburb of Philadelphia. She had us correspond with a pen pal in another country. At the time, I vaguely knew about our relatives in Poland, first cousins of Mom’s and Uncle Herman’s—Azriel and his wife, Roza, and their daughter, Batja, born around the same time I was. When Mom suggested Batja for the assignment, I jumped at the chance to get to know her better. She wrote in Yiddish

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and I wrote in English. Uncle Herman translated for me, and her teacher translated for her. She's never gone this long without writing.

Uncle Herman continues. "The only thing I know is what my neighbor told me. His brother is a deputy of the Jewish Council and managed to smuggle out a letter." He pauses, sipping his martini, as if to gird himself for what's about to come. "All the Jews have to wear white armbands with blue stars of David to identify themselves when they're outside the Stanislaw ghetto. Three gates are guarded by German Schutzpolizei and the Ukrainian militia on the outside, and by the Jewish police on the inside."

"Jesh poli?" asks Dad.

"Jewish police?" I say.

"One hundred Jews serve in the ghetto police. Can you imagine? Having to rat on your own kind?"

Mom's water glass trembles when she rests it on the saucer. "The world needs to know about this. I'm going to speak to the Joint."

That would be the Joint Distribution Committee, where Mom used to volunteer, raising money for Russian and Polish Jews who lost their homes in pogroms after the Great War. Her involvement in the organization is yet another casualty of Dad's illness, but she's still on their mailing list. Recently, I saw a Joint newsletter on our kitchen counter. It showed a Nazi propaganda poster advertising that Jews are lice and cause typhus.

"Vat else the letter say?" asks Aunt Jona.

"Twenty thousand souls are living there, smashed together in

a few city blocks. Sometimes twelve people sleep in a room smaller than this.” Uncle Herman gestures around our dining room walls. “Everything is dirty and rat-infested and most people are sick. Those who aren’t sick are forced to work in German arms factories. Many are beaten if they can’t keep up the ten-hour day with no lunch, no breaks.”

Aunt Jona leans into her husband. “Vat they do vith the sick ones?”

I’ve never seen my joke-telling uncle look so sad. “This wasn’t in the letter, but I’ve heard talk. About selections. During these aktions, no one knows who might be useful and who might be sent to die. The mechanics? The doctors? They certainly don’t need the ones who worked in offices or the old and the sick.” We all bow our heads, thinking of Azriel, who is a lawyer.

“How does a human do this to another human?” asks Mom.

It’s a question without an answer.

I picture Batja’s small hands, the ten-year-old ones that drew me a picture of her farm, milking goats the only labor those fingers had ever seen. In return, I sent her a drawing of our dog, Felix, in his doghouse, with a talk bubble that said *I woof you*. I think of her now, trying to fall asleep on an empty stomach, sharing stale air with eleven others in one cramped room. The food in front of me is no longer appetizing.

“Whaa abo sen monnn,” says Dad. “For bri.”

“What about sending money,” I repeat. “For bribes.”

“Do you see a money tree growing in our yard?” Mom throws her napkin down and rises to clear the plates.



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Silence around the table.

Uncle Herman turns to Dad. “What do home mortgages and trigonometry have in common?”

I know he’s trying to be funny, making light of our debt, needing a humorous release from this whole tragic situation in Poland. Dad can’t formulate the answer to the riddle. I see his lips moving, but no sound comes out. It’s painful to watch.

“You have to sine and cosine,” I blurt out.

Aunt Jona pats my hand. “Zei gezunt. She’s a math genius like her father.”

I stiffen. “It’s just a dumb joke, Aunt Jona. Anyone could answer it.” I lean over and hug Dad around the neck. “This big guy is the only mathematician in our family.”

Satisfied that Dad won’t need any more defending tonight, I slide my chair out. “Good Shabbos, everybody. Trudie’s waiting for me.”

At 8:30 p.m. it’s still light out. The sky is the color of a soft gray sweater. I meet my best friend at our usual corner, halfway between our houses.

“What took you so long?” Trudie tucks her halo of pin curls behind her ears. “I told Don we’d be there fifteen minutes ago. He can be so impatient.”

“We got to talking about my cousins in Poland.”

“My father says now that America has entered the war, it’s going to be over in a few months.”

“I don’t think so. The Great War lasted four years and this one’s been going on since 1939 with no signs of letting up. The Nazis are evil incarnate.”

“Aren’t you the Sad Sally. Brighten up. It’s the weekend, for Pete’s sake.” She hooks her elbow through mine. “I hope Don invites me to go to his parents’ lake house this summer. Do you think he’ll pop the question there? Or maybe he won’t wait that long, and he’ll get on his knee at graduation? Better yet, he might do it at Tommy Dorsey’s show next week. Can you imagine, getting engaged in front of Frank Sinatra?” She smiles at me. “I don’t think I’ve properly thanked you for being my partner in crime. Don and I would never have gone steady if it weren’t for you coming to Oswald’s with me every Friday night this year.”

Trailing after her is more like it. I’m no good at parties and I don’t know the first thing about flirting. But I’d never leave the house if it weren’t for Trudie. So I suppose being her sidekick is the price I have to pay for having any kind of social life.

“Any new jokes?” she asks.

I tell her Uncle Herman’s joke about the old man who can’t pee. She doubles over in hysterics. I always like making her laugh.

Oswald’s Drug Store is six blocks away from my house. For twenty years, the red neon sign has become a lighthouse of sorts, guiding young people to its sweet-filled shores. Trudie pinches her cheeks and waves at Don through the glass. Then she struts in and settles on his lap. I take the empty stool between them and one of Don’s friends, a skinny kid named Ricky.

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The bored soda jerk wipes down the counter in front of us while the boys argue about the Phillies. They always talk sports. Never world events. Never the draft. Come next fall, they'll all turn eighteen. Maybe they're avoiding the subject on purpose.

Trudie starts to retell my uncle Herman's joke, but when she gets to the part after the man says he's ninety-three years old, she pauses. She can't remember the punch line. Ever so casually, I lean over and whisper it to her.

"The doctor says you've peed enough!" she exclaims.

The guys crack up and I do, too, knowing I've made her look good. It's been that way since we met in grade school. She gets the big laugh and I get the assist without having to actually do any talking.

"I got center-field seats for tomorrow's game," says Don.

"Too bad I can't go. It's the MathMeet," says Ricky.

I stop sipping my malted. "The MathMeet?"

"She talks!" says a third boy.

"Don't tell me Nervous Nellie's going to enter and actually shout out the answers?" quips Don. I redden, hating the nickname.

Trudie pokes her boyfriend in the arm. "Don't be mean, Don."

"I just wondered where it was being held," I say.

"The Women's Club. Eleven a.m.," replies Ricky kindly.

They go back to their conversation. Trudie goes back to the messy work of stroking Don's Brylcreemed hair. I go back to my straw. I definitely do not, absolutely, under any circumstances, think about the MathMeet.