

ONE

“Jews out! Jews out! Jews out! Raus. Juden, Raus.”

We could hear their shouts clearly through the open windows in the house. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. The Germans had arrived in Zloczow, pushing out the Russians who had occupied this part of Poland for almost two years.

“God protect us,” Papa said.

He stood in the kitchen, his long beard and side-locks quivering slightly as he rocked back and forth, praying. Yehuda looked up from the homework he was doing at the kitchen table. Mama dropped the soup ladle back into the pot and turned to me, the oldest, to help. But all I could do was tremble and shake. Fanny, two years younger than me but so much braver, ran to Moishe who was toddling over to Mama and scooped him up. Sarah hustled into the kitchen from the bedroom and raced over to Fanny who always protected her.

Our door burst open, kicked in by a black boot.

“Jews out. Raus. Raus.”

“Children, children, stay with me,” Mama called.

I felt dizzy. I swayed a little.

Mama noticed and gave me a sharp look. “Marisa,”

she hissed, “you are not going to faint. Fanny, pinch her.”

Fanny pinched me on my arm, hard, so it hurt.

“Ow!” I yelped. But the pain did take my mind off the dizziness. The fear, however, grabbed my heart and squeezed and squeezed.

Mother hustled us out into the street. We stood helplessly just outside our door as a German soldier began to scream orders at us, speaking too fast for me to understand. German and Yiddish are very close and I should have been able to follow him, but I was too terrified to listen properly, to think straight. I concentrated on one thing — not fainting. I willed myself not to faint. We knew from our relatives who lived in places already occupied by the Germans that if I fainted, if I showed any weakness, I might never open my eyes again — I’d probably be shot, right there, on the spot.

“They want our valuables,” Mama translated. “They want any money we have, now. Tomorrow we have to get all our jewellery together, our good china, our crystal, our silverware, lamps, carpets, everything. And they say we have to form a Jewish council to collect it all and bring it to them because they are too busy for such work. And all radios must be turned in tomorrow.” She paused for a minute as the soldier near us finished shouting his orders. “Yitzhak, go in the house. Get the money that’s in the flowerpot. Bring it out.”

I knew that most of our money was not in the flowerpot. It was hidden in the basement. Papa nodded his head and hurried back inside. I spotted my friend Sophie across the street with her family. She

looked scared, too. Down the street, I could see Reb Shloime with his ten children, the widow Feinschmidt with her seven children, and the Zuckermans at the very end of the block who everyone knew were crazy, all twelve of them, grandparents, parents, and children. Once Chaïke Zuckerman bit a dog, right in front of me. And laughed! The poor dog howled all day.

Suddenly the old Mr. Zuckerman and the young Mr. Zuckerman were pushed into the middle of the street. Had they said something? Done something wrong? A German soldier shouted so the whole street could hear.

“Corner house,” Mama translated. “He says all men from the corner houses will —”

Before she could finish the German soldier took his pistol out of his holster and shot old Mr. Zuckerman in the head. Then he shot the young Mr. Zuckerman. An all-too-familiar sensation overtook me then, an excruciating dizziness, a feeling of falling so fast that my stomach lurched, and then blackness at the edge of my vision. I hated it, but I couldn’t stop it — that’s all I remembered.

“Wake up, Marisa, wake up.” It was my mother. I swam out of the darkness, my head spinning. I’d had some awful dream . . . “Marisa, they’re gone. Wake up. Everyone is safe.”

“The Zuckermans?”

“Not the Zuckermans.” She shook her head. “We’re lucky, I suppose,” she continued. “At least they didn’t lock us all in the synagogue and burn it down.”

I sat up. Mama had put me on the couch. Mama was big and strong and was used to carrying me when

I fainted. I took after Papa who was small with fine bones and delicate features, and had a delicate constitution. I was blond like him, too, with blue eyes, whereas Mama and the other children had black hair and brown eyes.

“They are demanding that all the girls report first thing in the morning to clean for them. You and Fanny and Sophie and Chaike and Lotte, you all must go.”

I started to shake again. “I can’t, Mama. I can’t. I’m too scared. What if they shoot me or decide to hurt us?”

“If you don’t go, for sure they’ll shoot you,” Mama said. Her eyes had a dead look in them and she was calm, as if she weren’t talking about her own daughters and their friends.

Papa came over to me, tears in his eyes. “Say your prayers, Marisa. Maybe God will protect you. Your parents can’t. Your parents are reduced to *nothing*. What good is a father who can’t protect his young?”

He sat down, put his head in his hands, and wept. Papa had wept when little Benjamin died. He had wept for days. That’s the only other time I’d seen him cry. He was always so happy. He studied Torah, went to shul, taught, loved his family; he never had a complaint. Even when the Russians occupied Zloczow, he didn’t seem to mind. Of course he felt very sorry for the rich Jews who were sent to Siberia. But then he said how lucky for us that God had chosen us to be poor, because the Russians loved the poor. They tried to help us, and somehow we always had enough food. We managed.

“Is God punishing us, Papa?”

“I don’t know, Marisa.”

“But Papa, if everything is God’s will, then this *must* be a punishment.”

“*Shah, shah,*” Mama said, “enough of this talk. We have to be practical. We will say our prayers, but we will also do what we have to so we can survive. That’s how we’ll operate from now on. So tomorrow you’ll go and clean. I think that’s all they want, Marisa, cleaners. The Russians weren’t that fussy, you know. But the Germans — everything has to shine. Everything has to be perfect. It was like that when I went to visit Aunt Esther in Berlin. You couldn’t find a speck of dust in that entire city.”

Mama is probably right, I told myself. The Russians *were* very boorish. And poorer even than we were. The wives of the officers wore felt boots, not even leather, and told us that at home children could go blind from hunger. Imagine. Blind. In Zloczow you might be poor, but you always had enough to eat.

As soon as my head cleared and I didn’t feel dizzy anymore I was able to think, and thinking led to worrying. How were my friends? Had anyone else been killed? And how was Shmuel?

Shmuel was the son of Papa’s brother’s second wife: the son she had *before* she married Papa’s brother, Avraham. In other words we were cousins, but we weren’t related by blood. If we hadn’t been cousins I never would have met him because his family wasn’t observant at all. Papa used to say, “They’ll cause the Messiah to come early!” (The Messiah will come when the world is in turmoil.) Shmuel was sixteen, a year older than me, tall, with black hair and huge blue eyes.

We rarely got a chance to meet, as I couldn't just talk to boys, of course, but at family gatherings we could talk and we did. He was only a baby when his mother remarried so we grew up together. He was the opposite of me. Not afraid of anything! I admired that. But I didn't know whether that would help him or hurt him once the Nazis arrived.

Mama forbade us to go out of doors for the rest of that day, and we didn't have a telephone so we didn't know what else was happening. When the war had started two years ago we were afraid that the Germans would take us over but instead the Russians did. We hoped to wait out the war under Russian rule. But when we saw that comet in the sky one dark August night, everyone knew it was a bad omen. So in September of 1941 when the German planes began to bomb Zloczow no one was surprised. The Russians had nothing to fight with; they shot at the planes with pistols and rifles. They didn't even have enough trucks to run away in — they marched out of the city on foot as the Germans advanced. So finally, Germany had conquered almost all of Europe, including us, and they wanted Russia, too. We knew that if they won Russia, there wouldn't be a Jew left alive anywhere.

I didn't tell anyone this, but often I thought of different ways to kill myself. After all, if I was going to die anyway, wouldn't it be better to do it in my own way? I'd heard that when the Germans got rid of Jews sometimes they buried them alive because they didn't want to waste the bullets.

I lay on the couch that day and I shook so hard from fear I couldn't stop. Fanny came over and put

her arms around me and tried to comfort me. I wished I could be brave like her. Because somehow, the next day, I knew I'd have to go to work for the Germans.