

Chanukah Dreams

By Nechama Tec

Late fall signals the approach of Chanukah, a joyous celebration. Images of festivities, games and gifts become the daydreams of most Jewish children.

In the fall of 1942, as a Jewish girl of eleven, I too had dreams, dreams of a different kind. I longed to stay with my parents. But that fall they were going away, and for my own safety I was to be left behind. For that fall, in Nazi-occupied Poland, Jews were being hunted.

The day for my parents' departure came. They had decided to take a late train. There was safety in darkness, they explained to me. As the hours passed into the night, I desperately tried to overcome my tiredness. But I was too tired to resist. Gently, my parents urged me to go to sleep, promising that they would awaken me in time to say goodbye.

Startled, I woke up. My father was bending over me with a strangely intense look on his face. It took me a moment to remember we were in the apartment of the Pys family, the Poles who by sheltering us had risked their own lives. It was time to say goodbye to my parents. They were leaving for Warsaw without me.

I felt something wet. Father's tears were on my face. Desperately and impulsively, I threw my arms around him, and before I could help myself I sobbed, "Take me with you, don't leave me, please don't leave me!" Immediately I was ashamed of my outburst. I knew that my parents were leaving me only because they wanted me to be safe and that it was wrong of me to cause them more suffering.

My mother, crying silently, stood beside my father. He looked at her, shaken and in pain, and then at me. "Dress quickly," he said. "You are taking the train with us!" He turned back to my mother: "Yes, there is no point in leaving her here. What kind of a life will she have when we are dead?"

My blond hair was carefully combed. I dressed with special neatness. I was given a doll to carry so I would look more like a Polish child. My mother in mourning clothes, her face hidden by the veil, would be with me, but my father would travel in a different train compartment. Our plan was to sit next to a window, and at each stop my father would tap on it twice to let us know he was still alive.

No one tried to stop my mother and me as we walked to the station, some distance ahead of my father. I wanted to look behind me, to make sure that no one had stopped him, but my mother and I had to behave as though we did not even know he existed. When we safely reached the station we walked along the platform, tightly holding hands, looking for a compartment with a

window seat still vacant. When we found one, the temptation to look back, to see if my father was still there, almost overwhelmed me. But trying to appear calm, I boarded the train without turning my head.

As we seated ourselves, the train jolted into motion and pulled slowly, slowly out of the station. The passengers hardly looked at my mother, but I drew their attention. They seemed to go out of their way to be kind to me. Some patted me on the head, some offered me candy, and some even tried to engage me in conversation. My mother never let go of my hand. Her grip was desperate, full of meaning. We did not speak to each other. Only the pressure of hands and bodies was there.

At each stop we waited. And at each stop, against the window came the double tap.

Despite my apprehension I was happy. I was relieved at being beside my mother and close to my father. They did not leave me behind, I kept thinking, and the train wheels seemed to click out the words: They did not leave you behind, they did not leave you behind....

The train was slowing down. The locomotive made complaining sounds. "Finally, Warsaw," I heard someone in our compartment say.

The exhausted, drowsy passengers began to stir. The optimists among them tried unsuccessfully to remove the wrinkles from their clothes with the palms of their hands. All this went on in silence and in partial darkness.

Through the dirty windows a gray light filtered into our crowded compartment. Only then could I clearly make out the faces of the passengers. As I watched them I wondered how many were Jewish. "Surely we are not the only ones," I thought. Indeed, whenever I heard about Jews who wanted to pass as Christians they were all going to Warsaw. Warsaw was a big city. In Warsaw, Jews could become lost in a crowd and never be recognized. "If Jews come here it must be a safe place!" I was glad to know that we had arrived in such a safe place.

As the train came to a full stop I moved closer to my mother. Without quite knowing why I felt a sensation of fear. This time even my mother's closeness was not enough. Already eleven, I knew that I had to appear calm by substituting numbness for this fear.

Almost noiselessly the passengers left the train. I noticed German gendarmes scattered all over the platform and an involuntary shudder went through me, followed by an added pressure from my mother's hand.

As passengers filled the platform, the Nazis quickly and decisively began to circulate among them. Here and there a German was accompanied by a Polish youth. Suddenly, I heard one of these boys call out "Jude, Jude." With

flashlights the German officers illuminated faces. The people they selected were roughly pushed in the direction of a nearby building.

And as more passengers reached the platform, the Nazis and their helpers began to move faster and faster. It was as if they were in a terrible hurry, almost in a frenzy. The use of flashlights increased as they illuminated the eyes. Jews had sad eyes. We knew that Jews could be recognized by the sadness of their eyes. It was well known. In Lubin my parents kept telling me: "Pretend you are happy. Think about happy things. You must try to have happy eyes! No sad eyes."

With an assumed indifference I discreetly watched the frantic movements of the gendarms and listened to their "Jude, Jude." I wondered why this was happening here. Warsaw was supposed to be safe. How did the Nazis know that so many Jews were coming here.

With the crowd we moved slowly toward the gate. My father stayed close behind us. I pretended not to see the widely circulating Germans. When my mother held out our papers, the Nazi barely glanced at them. He smiled at me and patted my blond hair. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that my father also passed inspection. Boldly and decisively he hailed a carriage, and soon we were moving into the forbidden Christian world.

In 1945 the dreaded Nazi terror was over. But for most of Poland's Jews, the defeat of the Nazis came too late. To Lublin, my hometown, a city whose prewar population included 40,000 Jews, only a handful of Jews returned. Among them were only three intact families. We were one of them. In the end, the balance between goodness and evil had tipped in our favor. We had survived because some Christians had been willing to risk their lives to help save ours.

BRUSSELS (WNS) — Brussel's Zaventem International Airport will soon have a synagogue in its main terminal hall where observant Jews in transit can worship at the appointed time. Interior Minister Herman DeCroo approved the project and an architect has been engaged. Construction will begin shortly and the synagogue is expected to be opened some time next year.

JERUSALEM (WNS) — The Israel Defense Force will retrench because of an \$80 million cut in the defense budget, Chief of Staff Gen. Moshe Levy told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee. He said about 2,000 permanent employees of the IDF will be dismissed, training and reserve duty time will be reduced and aircraft and tanks will be operated fewer hours.

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