

The Promise.

Israel stumbled through the snow; his breath coming in short labored gasps. He paused for just a moment and tried desperately to slow his breathing and stifle the panic that threatened to choke him. Frost hovered in a long misty shroud across the fields obscuring his vision and the hungry wind ate into his bones like acid. He shivered and tugged the threadbare jacket closer around his emaciated body and peered over his shoulder. They were still following. He could make out the ghostly figures of the soldiers wrapped snug in thick green coats moving through the mist with dogs whining and straining on their leashes. Israel pushed forward single-mindedly, bound by the promise he had made to his father.

Moving as fast as possible across the field of deep snow, Israel finally reached a forest of tall trees which offered him camouflage from the soldiers hunting him. The muscles in his legs ached, and his fingers were numb, but he could not rest. His only chance of escape was to reach the station before the last train going south or his capture would be certain and if that were to happen he expected no mercy from the German soldiers.

Although there was still a long way to go, and the soldiers seemed to be gaining on him, he had the advantage of knowing the terrain better than the Bosh. He darted between the tall trees across the familiar landscape where only a few years ago he had played hide and seek with his school friends.

Nothing in his life remained as it had been before the German soldiers came marching down the cobbled road into his town of Suckow. Fear and uncertainty swept through the town like a winter blizzard. Most of the town citizens hid in their houses with

the curtains drawn. His thoughts turned to the obscene pantomime of degradation as his people were dragged from their homes and herded like cattle into the ghetto.

He remembered the confusion and dread of the unknown as he stumbled along beside his grandfather clasping his suitcase, his eyes fastened on his father shuffling along in front of him and his Polish mother walking tall, her face pale and set. They had been forced to leave their small stone house with dinner still on the table.

The ghetto had been the beginning of a new phase in their lives. Hunger became the enemy and disease stalked the streets. In the bitter cold, death lurked stealing his quota. When his mother died of pneumonia she was tossed into a cart like garbage, amongst bodies already piled high. Life had little value. Hope left their hearts and time had little meaning.

Israel, his father, and grandfather survived day after monotonous day in the squalid, overcrowded tenements. They became thinner and weaker with each passing month. The two rooms they shared with a family of four had no heating, and there was a shortage of blankets to keep them warm. At intervals, the soldiers came and removed families from their building. Israel watched as the men, women and children were ordered from their dwellings clutching suitcases crammed with their possession. The soldiers used the butts of their rifles to herd the detainees to the freight train yard in the town center and pushed them into the waiting carriages for relocation to Treblinka, a town short distance northeast of Suckow.

It was not long before whispered stories of the horrors and inhumanity of Treblinka swept through the ghetto, and people trembled when they learned the truth about the death camp. It was then that Israel's father set about planning for his son's escape. The plan was for Israel to reach the passenger train station on the outskirts of the township and stowaway on a train going south. If Israel could reach his Polish Aunt living on a

farm forty kilometers south of Suckow she would take him in and care for him. In return he could help with the farm chores.

Before the war, Israel had made the train journey with his mother many times to visit with his aunt and his cousins. But to get to the farm now in the midst of a war he needed reach to the train station with soldiers following at his heels. By taking the route through the dense forest and avoiding the open fields, he might have a chance. But he would need good fortune when he reached the lake; if the ice were too thin he would be unable to cross to the other side; his journey would have been for nothing.

When the day came and Israel, his father, and grandfather were ordered to march to the freight train yard for the journey to Treblinka, their plan went into action. Standing beside the open doors of the carriages, they waited among the crush of prisoners to be loaded. The guard had completed his count of prisoners and was at the far end of the line starting to load the carriages with their human cargo.

Israel's father suddenly dropped to the ground covering his son with his body. Grandfather toppled over on top of them both, covering them with his long-tattered coat. People in the crush around them yelled in protest as they staggered and fell. Israel had only seconds to crawl from beneath his father and under the train. He dragged himself between the tracks under the carriage and slipped out the far side. The angry shouts of soldiers rose above the noise of the train as the guards tried to restore order. Israel peered between the carriages in time to see a soldier's rifle butt come down in a sweeping arc on his grandfather's head as he attempted to stagger to feet. The old man crumpled face down on the ground and lay still. A crimson stain crept slowly through the snow. Israel turned and crawled into the vegetation beside the railway tracks. Crouching low, he inched himself towards the long grass in the open fields aware the soldiers would soon come after him when they realized they were one body short.

With the soldiers in his wake, it had taken Israel three hours battling through the snow and the dense forest to finally reached the frozen lake. Now he paused unsure whether to risk his weight on the shimmering glass crust. Again, he peered over his shoulder; death stalked either way. Holding his breath, he stepped tentatively onto the smooth icy surface. His saturated shoes slipped and skimmed on the thin ice and he battled to regain his balance. With trembling legs he propelled himself forward; the ice crunched and cracked beneath his bony frame. The wind coming off the mountain slithered down the collar of his coat and caused his eyes to water and his teeth to chatter.

His heart was pounding when he reached the other side of the lake and took cover behind the trunk of a tall naked tree. He waited to catch his breath, anxiously watching as the soldiers in heavy coats and black boots came out of the forest and inspected the frozen lake. To his relief, they did not try to cross the thin ice and moved on further along the bank with their dogs tugging on their leashes. He leaned against the tree trunk desperate to rest but darkness was falling like a cloak and although he was only a short distance from the train station his efforts would be in vain if he missed the last train. He propelled himself forward and hurried toward his destination, his body numbed with cold.

He reached the stationhouse and crept into the inky darkness behind the building, his thin body pressed hard against its rough wooden structure. His eyes darted about him like a trapped animal as he watched for soldiers patrolling the station. Without travel documents, he knew if he were stopped and challenged by the soldiers his bid for escape would be over. It was not long before he heard the blast of the train's whistles as it trundled into the station and pulled up to the platform. Peeping around the corner of the building, he was relieved to see the platform packed with civilians pushing and shoving to find a place in a carriage on the last train for the day. He slipped from the shadows and

moved swiftly into the crowd, his eyes never leaving the soldier who was striding up and down beside the train stopping passengers to inspect their documents. He elbowed his way through the crowd and clambered into the last carriage. Within minutes the train whistle sounded and with a hiss and a cloud of steam it chugged from the station.

In the overcrowded carriage people clutched bags, baskets and packages tied with string and small children clung to the coats of their mothers. A group of German soldiers with rifles slung across their shoulders clustered together, their guttural voices and laughter made Israel shiver. He squeezed closer to the carriage door and swayed with the motion of the train in a dance of daunting circumstance. Packed beside the bodies of fellow travelers he felt like a skeleton at a feast as he absorbed their warmth. He kept his eyes fixed on the frozen landscape flashing by mile after mile as the train ate the distance between him and the farm of his Polish Aunt.

The train slowed and shunted on the track as it approached a bend. Israel knew that soon the train would cross the bridge and that the station was then only a short distance away. It was time for him to leave the train. Keeping his eyes on the soldiers, he slipped through the door and onto the coupling between the carriages. A bitter wind punched his face and clawed at his neck. His small hand clung to the rail for support as he inched towards the edge of the hard metal surface. The sound of the steel wheels on the track seemed to shriek freedom, freedom in his ears. He intended to keep the promise he made to his father and tell of the death camp at Treblinka that churned out the bones of Jews and perpetrated other atrocities the mind could not fathom. Israel whispered his oath *Schreibt un farschreibt* 'write the record'. The earth flashed by white as angles wings; it blurred his vision as he propelled himself forward with all his strength, into the snow and the arms of hope.