

IN THE FACE OF EVIL

- Based on the life of Dina Frydman Balbien -

FriesenPress hereby grants The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation to publish two chapters of Tema Merbacks' book entitled *In the Face of Evil: Based on the life of Dina Frydman Balbien*, based upon the contractual 'non-exclusivity' clause, found in the author's publishing agreement.



TEMA N. MERBACK

Author's Introduction

I wish to thank the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation for including *In the Face of Evil: Based on the Life of Dina Frydman Balbien* (Friesen Press Victoria, BC, Canada Dec 2010) on their prestigious website and sharing a selection from my book with their illustrious friends and supporters.

In the Face of Evil is the story of ten year old Dina, my mother, and her survival of the Holocaust. Like all Holocaust books, it bears the imprint of extraordinary good and unfathomable evil. It is a tale of miracles, of people, who at their own peril, intentionally intervened and some who intervened by chance saving the life of a teenage girl. It is also a story of bravery in the face of dire consequence and how that same girl returned the gift of life to others. In the end it is a testament to the indomitable spirit of one human being and her ability to retain all of the goodness that is within each of us, even in the face of evil.

The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation has honored its mission to bring to light those righteous individuals that resisted terror and evil and by example and deed made a difference during the Holocaust. It is an organization dedicated to human dignity, equality, justice and liberty that recognizes the best of mankind and strives to teach and endow future generations with those attributes exemplified by the heroes of World War II.

I am honored,

Tema N. Merback
Malibu, California

In the Face of Evil

- Based on the life of Dina Frydman Balbien -

By Tema N. Merback

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First Edition – December 2010

Collaborated with Dina Frydman Balbien.

Cover photo of Dina taken in Atlantic City after war,
approximately 1946-1947.

ISBN

978-1-77067-080-8 (Hardcover)

978-1-77067-081-5 (Paperback)

978-1-77067-082-2 (eBook)

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Published by:

FriesenPress

Suite 300 – 852 Fort Street

Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 1H8

www.friesenpress.com

Distributed to the trade by The Ingram Book Company

What People are Saying about In the Face of Evil

“This book is the outcome of three miracles. First, the mother Dina Frydman, lived through the Holocaust, surviving an unbelievable, all too true set of tragic experiences that wiped out her entire family: occupation, ghetto, work camp, slave labor, *Auschwitz*, *Bergen-Belsen* (in its final stage of total collapse and chaos). Miraculously, she came through with her goodness, honor and affirmation of life intact. This book reflects those qualities.

Second miracle: for decades, in an incredible feat of memory, Dina relived and told her stories, recounting them with pitch perfect recollection, including a vivid gallery of portraits of friends, family, victims, persecutors, and with vital scenes of the kindness and cruelty of strangers, the love and incapacity of family, the support and saving help of friends.

Third miracle: Dina’s daughter, Tema Merback, absorbed these stories and reproduced them in this authentic, gripping, moving account. What the mother could not do – put her testimony in a book – the daughter has done and without losing any of the fire, or the suffering, or the heartbreak or the moments of relief and of despair. In the end this book communicates an irrepressible, overflowing life force and decency and hope in the face of the most inhuman crimes ever.

As authentic, as compelling, as devastating as a survivor’s account written at first hand, this book snatches memory and life from the jaws of oblivion and gives them as a gift to its readers. This book was a mitzvah to write and a mitzvah to read.”

Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, Founding President, Jewish Life Network; Founding President, CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership; Chairman, United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 2000-2002.

“Reading *In the Face of Evil*, brought to mind two aspects that couldn’t be more vivid. Simply, it is a period of time when there were no iPhones, nor iPads, or Facebook; the pronoun mostly used was ‘we and us’, as in family. Something that is missing in this current world of ours. Reading *In The Face of Evil* allowed me the honor to hear the voices of a family that stood the test of time. I could smell the odors described, hear the noises and yes, feel their pain. I recommend this book to every High School student, their parents and most importantly as a reminder for the State Department and Pentagon which deal with similar tyrannies.”

Peter Kash is an international bestselling author, and has visited Dachau and Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto. He is currently completing his doctorate thesis in Jewish Education at the Azrieli School at Yeshiva University.

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“To forget the Holocaust – is to kill twice.” Elie Wiesel

“The Oath”

Avraham Shlunsky, Israeli Poet

In the presence of eyes

Which witnessed the slaughter

Which saw the oppression

The heart could not bear,

We have taken an oath: To remember it all,

To remember, not once to forget!

Forget not one thing to the last generation!

In the Face of Evil is dedicated to and in remembrance of the 1.5 million Jewish children and the 4.5 million plus Jewish teens and adults that were exterminated under the murderous regime of the Nazis.

I also dedicate to and acknowledge my mother, Dina Frydman Balbien, the bravest person I have ever known. She is my inspiration in life and the heroine of this book. Her endurance of the Holocaust has never dimmed her positivity or belief in humanity. Writing the story of my mother's survival during World War II was a journey that has transformed my life forever.

Prologue

Seventy years have elapsed since the end of my childhood and the beginning of World War II. The destruction of community and family that followed the German invasion and conquering of Poland precipitated and forced me into an unnatural adulthood. The odd windfall of this calamitous event is a searing imprint of memory. Faces and voices have followed me my entire life offering up their advice and counsel, whether desired or not, shadowing each step as I steered my course through the seas of life. At times they have proven to be more real to me than yesterday's events. Often these friendly ghosts have capriciously danced through the corridors of my dreams as real and alive as the last day that I saw them. Like the story of "Brigadoon", the mythical community of book and song that reappeared every hundred years and for one shiny bright inexplicable moment sparkled through the mists of Scotland. So has the vanished world of *Radom*, Poland returned to me in dreams and at times in waking just as it was long ago. The joyous community with its various degrees of religiosity, the marketplaces and shops, the places of learning, the observance of holidays, the intellectual liveliness and of course the devotion and celebration of the Sab-

bath are all safely locked inside the reels of memory that play like a film in my mind, alive again.

Although, I have tried at times to put the war behind me for both mine and my children's sanity; like the tattoo that I bear it is burned into me and has colored every moment of my life. With the passage of time there have been endless books with their endless revelations as to why or how such a nightmare could have occurred, but in the end the only lesson learned is that it happened. The Holocaust happened and millions perished through systematic slaughter. A world of people, their joys and sorrows disappeared and with them went a way of life. The apocalypse has long passed and the years have flown by like the clouds in a windblown sky. Soon there will be no survivors left and the keepers of the memory will be just that, a memory. So it has come to me the bearer of the torch the last to remember their sweet sojourn among friends and enemies before I too leave this world of bitter sweetness. The tale has now been written of those that lived that they may endure and that you might know them.

Dina Frydman Balbien

Part 1

Radom, Poland Summer of 1939

- Chapter 1 -

An Ordinary Family

From the window of our apartment, I look down on the bustling streets. The morning sun shines on my street, *Koszarowa Ulica*, a busy thoroughfare in *Radom's* Jewish quarter. Placing my hand on the window, I feel the warmth radiate through the glass. The bright August morning pours into my bedroom, casting away the shadows of a doubt-filled night. The ordinary ebb and flow of life seems to continue in a reassuring cycle of sunrises and sunsets.

Across the street, the shopkeepers are opening their stores. Michal the baker comes out and looks at the sky. A smile spreads across his plump face as he brushes some flour from his prominent nose. Mrs. Rabinowicz greets him, and with a last wistful glance at the sky, he follows her into his bakery.

The birds' songs crescendo in the tall chestnut trees lining the street, adding to the symphony of daily life. People hurry through the busy streets in pursuit of their daily callings. Bicyclists weave among the horse-drawn *dorozka's*¹, the principle form of transportation throughout Poland's cities. Life seemed normal enough on this warm summer day in 1939.

I rub my eyes in an effort to dispel the dream that still plagues me, trying to make sense of the visions of the night. It has been two years since my beloved *zaida*² passed away. Last night in my sleep, he came to me. Reaching across the barriers that separate the living from the dead, he touched me in an urgent gesture to communicate. Standing at the foot of my bed silently beckoning me to acknowledge his presence, he hovered; his large immaterial body shimmered before me. His eyes, the color of blue ice, bore into me through the veil of death. He conveyed a warning I could not fathom. The ghostly apparition had disturbed my peaceful slumber and I had brusquely shooed my grandfather away, reminding him that he belonged in the afterworld of the dead.

I awoke with a horrible feeling of guilt and remorse. Why had I not reached out to him full of the love we once felt for one another? I had not asked him why he was there. Instead, in the imaginary landscape of my dream, I had told him to leave and not to return. How could I have sent my beloved grandfather away? I tried to brush the vision from my mind and replace it with the happy memory of my grandfather as he was in life, *Jekiel starke*, meaning Jekiel the strong in Yiddish. Rhythmically swaying in his rocking chair, he impatiently waited for our

1 Horse drawn buggy

2 Grandfather in Yiddish

cherished daily routine—when I climbed on his lap and kissed him. Together we would rock as he told me stories of his youth, the security of his arms enfolding me, his white beard tickling until I was reduced to giggles. The fond memories of a favorite grandchild encircled me in a blissful cloak of warmth and safety, shielding me from the terrors of the dream.

My *zaida*, a pillar of our community, was sorely missed by all. Although my brother Abek and I were too young to attend his funeral, I remember my parents' description of that saddest of days. Seldom had there been seen such an outpouring of respect and honor for a citizen. My grandfather had been an important patron of an orphanage the Rothschild family had founded in *Radom* a century before. It was one of many institutions established by charitable benefactors to provide for those less fortunate. The Jewish community was well organized in caring for its own.

The funeral had been a solemn affair on a gray rainy morning. A special *dorozka*, drawn by white horses, pulled the funeral bier containing my grandfather's coffin. Behind in sorrow had walked my parents, grandmother, and sister, along with my uncles and aunts, cousins, friends of the family, and dignitaries from the community. Following them, walked more than a hundred children from the orphanage, flowing in a slow dignified river of grief to the old Jewish cemetery dating from the tenth century. There, my grandfather was laid to rest surrounded by ancient tombstones, testaments to the Jewish community's continuance and prosperity in Poland. For centuries the Jewish people had been persecuted and exiled from kingdom to king-

dom until finally they had found a safe haven given asylum by a benevolent Polish king.

My grief is an empty void within me and now I have driven away the ghost of my *zaida*. Turning from the window, I wonder if he will ever return to my dreams.

I hear my grandmother call from the next room, “*Dinale, kym a wek fin fencter est za speit ci gain ci shuleh.*” (Dina, get away from the window you are going to be late for school.) I hurry into the spacious kitchen and grab my grandmother from behind, squeezing and kissing her firmly on the cheek, “Good morning *Bubysy*, it’s the most beautiful day!”

“Good morning *Maidele*, come and eat your breakfast. Did you sleep well?”

“No, I tossed and turned, from strange dreams, I guess.”

“What dreams, tell me about them maybe we can make sense of them? They say that dreams are a premonition of what the future holds.”

“Don’t worry *Bubysy*. They can’t be very important because I can’t remember what they were.” How could I tell my grandmother I had spent the night wrestling with the ghost of her dead husband? She would attach all kinds of superstitious meaning to my visions.

“I am sorry you didn’t sleep well sweetheart, but at least today is Friday and you can sleep late tomorrow.”

Nodding, I give her a reassuring smile. I do not like to upset this sweet woman whose life is solely dedicated to her children and grandchildren. My grandmother lives with us, as had my grandfather before his death at age 72. The two had made an incongruous couple, visually at least. He was a strapping giant

of a man well over six feet and she a tiny bit of a woman barely reaching his chest. Spending time with my grandfather had been my greatest joy. Perhaps a bit jealous, my grandmother sometimes felt I occupied a little too much of his time and she would banish me outside when I was overtiring him. Several years before in a moment of childhood frustration, I had retaliated and struck back at her. Resentful of being cast off from his lap and forced outside to play, I had pushed my grandmother and she had lost her balance, falling down the stairs in front of our building. Fortunately, she was only bruised and not harmed, but I had received a severe punishment and was not allowed to play outside for a week. My father, who never spoke above a whisper, was furious with me, banishing me to my room until my grandmother was well enough to get out of bed. My grandfather, who always sided with his beloved granddaughter, forgave me without reservation, sneaking into my room to keep me company, his pockets laden with forbidden treats. The incident had filled me with a well-deserved sense of guilt. I was especially obedient and loving of my grandmother thereafter.

Snatching a freshly baked roll from the basket, I sit down at the table next to my younger brother Abek, tousling his tight blond curls.

He brushes my hand away from his hair. "*Mamashy* says you have to take me with you and Fela when you go to the movies tomorrow."

"There is no way that you are coming, Abek! Fela and I have been planning this for weeks and we don't need you to ruin our day."

"You have to take me. *Mamashy* said so!"

“We’ll see about that!”

Abek looks pleadingly to *Bubysy* for her intervention.

“Dina, don’t torture your brother.” Grandmother places a bowl of fresh blueberries and cream in front of me and I begin to eat. Kissing Abek’s forehead she continues, “If your mother says Abek can go, than he will go.” She smiles at Abek smoothing his curls, “That is enough arguing for one morning. Now eat your breakfast *kindele*¹ and off you go to school.”

The effort to define my place in my family is a constant dilemma for me. I crave confirmation of my uniqueness as the middle child. My first-born sister, who is sixteen, is clearly the standard against which all comparisons are made, both in intellect and beauty. My younger brother of seven holds the lofty position of being the long awaited son and baby everyone dotes on. At ten, who am I next to these two bright planets in the universe? Sighing, I resign myself to the inevitable intrusion of my brother on my weekend plans. Bounding from the chair, I grab my book bag.

My grandmother kisses and hugs me, her last words dissolving in the air as I dash through the door.

“Remember Dina, straight home after school it is Shabbat and your parents will be home early.”

As I run down the stairs, I think of my mother and father who had left in the early hours of morning to open our butcher shop on *Rynek* 13, a few blocks from our home. I pictured my mother sweeping the front steps of our store, greeting the passersby on the street. Always cheerful, smiling, and welcoming, my mother has a devoted following of customers in the gentile

¹ Children, Yiddish

community and is admired as a successful businesswoman in the Jewish community. In Poland, it is unusual for a woman to work, but my mother loves the independence that working affords her. Maintaining a home is a huge job in itself, but mama prides herself on perfectly balancing her family and working life. In their large store, the tiles scrubbed to a dazzling sheen, my parents work side-by-side providing for their many customers.

The morning light half blinds me with its brilliance as I walk from the cover of our courtyard into the busy Friday pedestrian traffic. My neighbor and girlfriend, Fela waits for me on the street. “*Dzien dobry*¹ Fela, sorry I’m late, were you waiting long?”

Smiling Fela raises her thick brown brows and questions, “Nu? So, what’s up?” Fela had an uncanny ability to read my moods.

I shudder remembering the ghostly specter of my grandfather, “I had a dream last night that was so real; my *zaida* came to me and I sent him away. I can’t get it out of my mind, I feel sick about it. Do you think he will ever come to me in a dream again?”

“You are a goose. Why did you send him away?”

Turning and walking toward school, we cut through the slower moving people on the street.

“I was frightened; I’m not used to being visited by ghosts. He just stood at the foot of my bed glowing... trying to tell me something. I don’t know why I sent him away. I should have welcomed him instead of shooing him away. Why do you think he came to me?”

“He probably misses you as much as you miss him. Besides, it was a dream. Your grandfather loved you so much; even his ghost would forgive you anything.” She takes my hand and gives

¹ Good morning, Polish

a reassuring squeeze. "He'll be back, don't worry. Just don't tell him to go away next time." We walk in silence as I contemplate my doubts.

Changing the subject, anxiety grips Fela's voice. "I wish it was only ghosts that I am afraid of. Day and night, all my parents talk about is Hitler. 'Hitler's henchmen are beating the Jews.' 'Hitler's henchmen are seizing Jewish businesses.' It is like a broken record with a needle stuck. All I hear, day and night is the name Hitler!"

"I know it's horrible. My parents talk of nothing else but what Hitler is doing to the poor Jews of Germany and Austria. Every night they sit by the radio listening to him scream his hatred for the Jews. *Tata* says that he is afraid the Germans want Poland."

Fela nods, her face a mask of foreboding. "I know. Ever since *Krystallnacht*, it has gotten much worse. Do you think the Germans will try to take Poland?"

I reply in a low voice, "I hope not, but *Tata* says that nothing can stop them if they attack us."

The unforeseeable future shadows our steps as we walk in the dazzling sunlight, a sharp contrast to our worries. Fela and I know more about the current situation of the world than either of us would like. It is hard to ignore the constant barrage of bad news that swirls about us. A gloom settles over our conversation as we arrive at school.

Waiting for my teacher, Mrs. Felzenzwalbe, to arrive, I am consumed by the unusual dream of my grandfather. How I missed the man who had paved the way for the good life that my family enjoyed. My grandfather's struggles as a young man making his way in the world, like so many Jew's of his time, is a study in hard

work and industriousness. Traveling and developing a relationship with distant farmers, he began importing cattle from Russia and selling them in *Radom*. He achieved early success and was well respected in the community. A short time before his death, I was allowed to accompany him to the livestock market where he purchased beef at the large outdoor marketplace. My grandfather had suffered a wound in his heel that turned to gangrene. Unfortunately, the doctors were not able to save his leg and it had been amputated below the knee. Consequently, he walked with the aid of crutches. I attended him on this trip to carry his briefcase. I could not have been more delighted; it was a special honor to be chosen from his many grandchildren to accompany him. It was an adventure into worlds unknown, to observe the sights and smells of the marketplace. The grainy smell of hay and even the pungent aroma of cow manure combined with the earthy smells of the farmers and throngs of people created a heady mixture for a sheltered child. The Polish farmers had come from their surrounding farms to town with their cattle, calves, and other livestock. The large outdoor emporium was crowded with people. Varied languages filled the air, as vendors and buyers tried to outdo each other and obtain the best possible price. Their hands gesticulated and their voices rose to be heard above the din of the crowd. My grandfather walked among the stalls, stately and dignified greeting the farmers who vied for his attention. As we ambled through the crowd, he eyed the animals, stopping now and then to examine the eyes and mouth of a healthy looking beast. Finally, having found a cow that met his expectations, he engaged in a lively exchange. After a minute or two of haggling, he walked away saying over his

shoulder, "Too much money! Come Dynka." I had run behind him trying to keep up.

"*Zaida*, are you angry? Wait for me!"

Slowing his pace, he patted me lovingly on the cheek, "No, Dinale, I'm not angry. It is the nature of trade, the way business is done. Commerce is like a game, where you have to anticipate your partner's next move. Like in chess, each person tries to outwit the other. Now stay close to me. I don't want to lose you in this crowd."

As we moved away from the farmer's stand, I heard him call behind us.

"*Pan Frydman, Pan Frydman*, please sir come back!"

The farmer sensing failure and the possible loss of a sale came running after my grandfather, his arms waving, calling him back to his stall. After several minutes of fierce negotiations, they both smiled and shook hands, finalizing the bargain. We purchased the cow whose fate was sealed on its journey from farm to market. Several times that day, I witnessed the ritual of market etiquette and the game of commerce engaged in by two willing partners of buy and sell.

As I daydream of my grandfather, the rising volume of my classmates beckons me back to the present. "Hitler," "Czechoslovakia," "Poland," "Invasion," the words of war flutter around me like leaves falling from a tree in a winter's wind. None of us has ever experienced war first hand but our parents' growing fears are alive within us. We are keenly aware of the danger facing all of Europe from Germany's aggression; it is a daily discussion taking place in every home across the continent.

Mrs. Felzenszwalbe enters the classroom and the childlike exuberance of our voices fades to whispers.

“Good morning *Pani* Felzenszwalbe.”

“Good morning children. Please take out your math notebooks to begin today’s lesson.”

Happy to focus my mind on something other than my fears, I open my book and the thoughts of war recede into the background.

Mrs. Felzenszwalbe controls her classroom with a strict manner and a warm smile. Her deep blue eyes reflect the intellect of a probing mind and a life spent educating children. Her students respect and adore her, making for few behavior problems among us.

Adjusting her glasses, she sets about the morning session of mathematics and we begin our calculations in our notebooks. All thoughts of the belligerent nation of Germany are forgotten.

The Jewish and Polish communities in Poland live in segregation, as encouraged by church and state. Excluding business relationships, our daily contact with the Christian community is minimal. My friend’s and my parent’s friends are Jewish. However, my mother enjoys close professional ties within the Christian community as she deals exclusively with non-Jews at our butcher store. The students at my school are Jewish, but the curriculum is Polish, designed to meet the standards of every other public school.

I love school and try hard not to fall short of my sister’s performance, as she left a good impression on Mrs. Felzenszwalbe. On my first day of school, to my dismay, she singled me out and asked, “Dina Frydman is Nadja Frydman your sister?”

Embarrassed as all of the students had turned to scrutinize me, I stammered, “Yes *Pani Felzenszwalbe* she is.”

“If you do as well as your sister, I will be very happy with you.”

Angrily I had complained to my mother how it wasn’t fair that I should be compared to Nadja in front of the whole class. But Mrs. Felzenszwalbe, like the best of her profession, soon inspired me, opening new vistas of thought and reasoning. I studied diligently to gain her approval.

After school, Fela and I make our way through our neighborhood. The shopkeepers are closing their stores and hurrying home to celebrate *Shabbos*. Peacefulness descends upon the streets and the sweet perfume of freshly baked *challah*¹ and the fragrance of stewing meats and ground spices permeate the air. It is hard not to be caught up in the holiday magic of Shabbat. The turbulent storms of the world seem hard to imagine amid all the normalcy of everyday life and simple routine as our neighborhood prepares to greet the Sabbath Queen.

Fela and I stop to pick up my brother from his *cheder*² after school. The young boys emerging from the red brick building are loud and boisterous. My brother’s enthusiastic greeting enfolds us as he spots Fela and me in the crowd of parents and siblings, “*Shabbat Shalom Dina! Shabbat Shalom Fela!*”

“*Shabbat Shalom Abek,*” I take his hand and we begin the walk home. “How was school today Abek?”

“It was great. The Rabbi’s are teaching us the story of the golden calf. Remember when Moses went to Mount Sinai and God gave him the Ten Commandments and when he returned the people had melted all of their jewelry and molded it into an idol

1 Yiddish for the traditional woven egg bread

2 Private religious school for Jewish boys

of a calf. The Jews were dancing around worshipping the golden calf as if it were a god.”

“Yes silly, of course we know the story of Moses.”

“The Rabbis said that for forty days Moses prayed and begged God’s forgiveness until finally on *Yom Kippur*¹ God relented and forgave the people for worshipping a false god. God then commanded Moses to have the faithless Jews melt the golden calf and remake it into a golden tabernacle so that he could dwell among his people. He forgave the fickle Jews and showed them that their God was merciful. He also promised the Jewish people that he would dwell among them and return them to the land of Israel where they would live forever in the land of milk and honey. I told the Rabbi that maybe it is time for the Jewish people to go back to the Promised Land. Maybe that is why the Nazi’s have gained power. Maybe they are a sign from God that it is time for the Jewish people to go home.”

“Your teacher must have been stunned Abek,” says Fela.

“Yes, so what did the Rabbi say?”

Abek stops walking and assumes the Rabbi’s posture of contemplation, “He scratched his beard and rolled his eyes as he pondered what I said. Then he said he would have to think about my theory over the weekend and discuss it with the other Rabbis. He proposed that we continue our discussion on Monday. He also added that it was an interesting way of looking at the Nazi threat.” Abek’s face lights up in a proud grin.

“Yes well, you certainly gave those Rabbi’s something to think about.” I can’t help but be impressed with my brother’s reasoning. “We all know how smart you are. In fact, you are so smart;

1 The Sacred High Holiday for the Day of Atonement

I have decided you can come to the movies with Fela and me tomorrow.”

“I can? I can? Oh thank you, thank you Dina.” His small hand presses mine in gratitude and I am reminded of how young my brother really is.

“Please stop fussing Abek, before I change my mind.”

“I promise I will behave Dina. I promise I won’t talk during the movie.”

“You’d better not talk or I will never take you to the movies again!” I try to mask my amusement and portray a stern demeanor, but I cannot help but love my little brother whose birth has been such a godsend. Childbirth is dangerous and my mother had suffered several miscarriages between my sister and me and again between Abek and me. His birth has insured that the Frydman name will continue. My father has three sisters and all of their children carry their husband’s names. My sister and I are Frydman’s only until we marry.

Abek, beams with pleasure his crown of curls bouncing as he runs ahead. I smile as I ponder the future: my brother and his sons will carry on the Frydman name forever.

- Chapter 2 -

Welcome to the Sabbath Queen

Arriving at the courtyard of our building, I inhale the many aromas of holiday cooking. The delicious scents waft through the air from the apartments, each competing for prominence.

“Please tell your parents *Shabbat Shalom*,” I say as I hug Fela.

“*Shabbat Shalom* Fela,” Abek yells, bounding up the stairs as he waves good-bye.

“*Shabbat Shalom* Abek, see you tomorrow!” Fela calls to the place from which my brother has disappeared.

“I’ll meet you in the morning at nine and we can go to the apple orchard, okay?” I say, following Abek up the stairs.

“Nine is good.” She waves and is gone.

Entering my home, I am greeted by the flavorful fragrance of holiday cooking, sending pangs of hunger to my stomach. My mother stands at the stove busily preparing our Sabbath meal. The kitchen is warm and my mother's cheeks are flushed from her efforts. She bends to enfold me in the warmth of her arms as I kiss her, inhaling the sweet perfume that lingers in her hair and neck. Rising to her full height, Mama is an unusually statuesque woman who stands several inches taller than her husband. Her hair is black as a raven's wings and her eyes are washed pale as a sapphire sea. Solid and steadfast, the force of her nature is obvious—like a tigress, she protects her family.

Mamashy's childhood had been cut short and through no circumstances of her own, she was forced into adulthood. Mama came from a small city called *Brzeziny* in western Poland. It was not far from Poland's second largest city, *Lodz*. *Brzeziny* is a rural farming area with a large population of ethnic Germans. Her father, a butcher by trade, had begun to go blind when Temcia, my mother, was a teen. In a desperate effort to forestall the inevitable, my mother took my grandfather to Berlin to one of the leading eye specialists in Europe. In those days, it was a major endeavor to travel and required the proper travel documents. Permission to leave and to return entailed a tedious process of bureaucratic red tape. Relations between Poland and Germany were strained as always and even traveling by train was a major bother. The expense, of course was high, but anything to save my grandfather's vision was worth the effort. Sadly, it was all for naught. The prognosis was grim but definite. The doctors could do nothing to save his eyes. A short time later, he went blind and my mother was forced to become a breadwinner for the family.

Her perfect German spoken without an accent served her well. Entrepreneurial and of financial necessity, she developed her own little business. She traveled to the farmers on the outskirts of *Brzeziny* speaking her perfect German or Polish and taking their orders for specialty items they could not resist. She saved them the time and effort of traveling to the city to shop, freeing them from a lost day of work on the farm. The *Volks-Deutsche*¹ looked forward to my mother's visits for she always brought them little gifts of sweets. As she bicycled up the road to their farms, the children would run to greet her in anticipation of the goodies in her basket. Later she would return with a team of horses, driving a wagon laden with the farmers' goods.

I picture my fearless mother with her hair blowing in the wind as she flew across the country roads in her wagon, her hands firmly grasping the reins. Like a heroine in a movie, she stepped outside the acceptable bounds for a woman at that time. Creating a business of convenience for the farmers, she garnered a small profit and contributed to her family's survival. My mother's earnings and her older married sisters' contributions assured that my grandparents were secure financially. Even now, my mother and her five sisters send a monthly stipend to their elderly parents in *Brzeziny*.

Always hungry for my mother's attention, I never miss an opportunity to spend time alone with her. "Mamashy, tell me again the story of how you and *Tata* met."

"Dina, I have told you this story a thousand times," she laughs.

"I know, but please *Mamashy*, please tell me one more time."

1 Ethnic Germans

Smiling, she sets aside her spoon to tell me once more what I love to hear, “Well, one day a *szatchin*¹ came into your grandfather’s store telling him she had the perfect girl for your father. Your grandfather called your father over and the matchmaker repeated her praise of me, the wonderful Temcia Topolevich. Your father asked sarcastically, ‘and where does this most perfect of females live?’ The matchmaker answered, ‘Not far at all, in *Brzeziny*.’ Laughing your father asked, ‘Why do I have to go all the way to *Brzeziny* to find a bride? Aren’t there any girls in *Radom* that are good enough?’ The matchmaker shrugged her shoulders and said, ‘Trust me Joel; would I send you to *Brzeziny* if I didn’t think that this Temcia was the perfect girl for you? I have looked high and low for a girl to fulfill you and your parent’s desires. I have found you a diamond; do you want I should let you settle for a dull stone? It is your parent’s wish that you should meet the right girl and marry. What can I do if this girl happens to live in *Brzeziny*!’ With this your grandfather interjected, ‘What is the big deal? We take a bus ride to *Brzeziny*, take a walk in the park. You pass each other on the path, take a good look... nod hello... smile, and you either decide to meet formally or we go home. Not such a big investment.’ Your father reluctantly agreed and the anticipated day arrived. It was a beautiful spring afternoon; the roses were bursting from their buds and the fragrant petals lay strewn across the pebbled path the gentle breeze lifting them on the air until they floated down like feathers, dotting the emerald grass. I wore a stylish blue lace dress the color of my eyes and I carried a matching parasol that I twirled in the sunlight. At the pre-arranged time, your grandfather and

1 A matchmaker in Yiddish

father walked toward me. Your father wore a beige suit with a red tie and a brown fedora that accentuated his brown eyes. He looked so handsome. We acknowledged each other with a nod and smile as we passed. Your father turned around and called out to me, halting my progress, 'Miss Topolevich, would you do me the honor of walking with me?' We strolled down the garden path, your father and grandfather on either side of me. Of course, your father fell head over heels in love with me the second he saw me. I thought he had the kindest of eyes. Seeing the immediate connection between your father and me, your grandfather urged us to walk ahead alone while he sat and watched the chess players that gathered in the park on Sundays. We walked together quietly for a time, both of us shyly eyeing the other. I will never forget how nervous we both were, but everything about your father pleased me and I felt myself falling in love with him. We sat on a park bench enjoying the quiet of each other's company. Then he took my hand in his and suddenly the words began to flow between us, as natural as a river journeying to the sea. We shared so many common values and dreams. We knew we could build a good life together. Within a few days, your father and his parents returned to *Brzeziny* so the Frydman and Topolevich families could meet and the marriage could be formally arranged. We were engaged, our pictures taken, and the wedding was planned. The matchmaker had done her job well and earned her commission. Ever since then, our marriage has been blessed with mutual respect and admiration. Of course, the greatest confirmation of our love was the birth of our three beautiful children."

It is no wonder that my father fell madly in love with this self-sufficient, proud young woman when first he set eyes upon her. My mother fills the room with her presence. She is known for her beauty and intelligence. Her clever business sense adds greatly to her in-laws and her husband's successful business; but it is her laughter, a rich contralto of vibrant tones, that fills our home with magic. Like the beautiful operas she favors and plays on our phonograph, our home resounds with harmony and music. Mama is the perfect counterpart to my more serious and studious father. In an unusual example of equality in the home, my parents are partners in every facet of life.

“Oh Mama, I love the story of your courtship with *Tata*.”

The *lokshin*¹ coming to a boil rouses her from her reminiscence, “Yes, it is a lovely romantic tale. One day you too will fall in love with a handsome young man and have beautiful children and I will have the pleasure of being a doting grandmother. Now Dinale, enough tales of the ancient past, please hurry and tidy yourself for dinner so you can help me.” With a nostalgic sigh, she picks up her spoon continuing with the preparation of our meal, “Now go, shoo!”

“Yes *Mamashy*.” Always obedient to my mother, I rush to ready myself for dinner.

In the dining room, my grandmother is busy filling a cut crystal carafe with wine the color of claret. Wrapping my arms around her, I kiss her on her cheek, “*Shabbat Shalom Bubysy*.”

“Dinale, my darling *maidele*, *Shabbat Shalom*, how was your day?”

1 Fine egg noodles, Yiddish

“Fine, *Pani* Felzenszwalbe was strict as ever, but I got an A on my math quiz.”

“Good for you. Your *Tatashi* will be so proud. Be sure you tell him about your accomplishment at dinner.”

“I will. Fela and I walked home together and we can’t wait to go to the movies tomorrow with Nadja. I know you are right, *Bubysy*, about taking Abek. I told him he could come with Fela and me.”

“Your brother ran in the house to tell me. I’m so proud of you. You have one brother and it is only right that you should behave properly toward him and include him. Now hurry and get dressed. Your father will be home soon.”



Dina's parents' engagement photograph. Standing from the left Dina's mother Temcia resting her arms on her father Joel's shoulders. Dina's Uncle Alexander and Aunt Nachele standing, and her grandfather Jekiel seated. The photo had been sent to America to Jekiel's brother who had immigrated.

Looking around the spacious dining room, I linger looking at the Sabbath table dressed in white linen and finery. My sister set the table and it glitters with its abundance of Hungarian porcelain and silver. Two large heavy silver candlesticks stand gleaming, ready for sundown and the blessing that signals the beginning of the family meal. My father will soon return from *shul*¹ where he was welcoming the Sabbath Queen with prayer and thanking God for his blessings.

In our bedroom, my sister is sprawled on the bed, her head buried in a book.

Without looking up she asks, "How was school?"

I plop down beside her. "Schools fine, I got an A on my math quiz."

Smiling, her eyes still glued to the page, "Good for you Dina."

"What are you reading?"

"A speech Jabotinsky gave last year. He wrote it especially to rally the Jews of Poland. To warn us of the approaching evil and to beg us to get out of Europe before it is too late."

"What does it say? Read it to me."

"If I read it to you, *Tata* will be so angry at me. He will say that you are too young to have such worries."

"You have to read it to me; I promise I won't tell *Tata*. Please, Nadja, please read it to me."

"Oh, all right, but you had better not tell *Tata*."

"I promise I won't."

Snuggling close to my sister, I listen as she reads, "...it is already three years that I am calling upon you, Polish Jewry, who are the crown of world Jewry. I continue to warn you incessantly

1 Synagogue

that a catastrophe is coming closer. I became gray and old in these years, my heart bleeds, that you, dear brothers and sisters, do not see the volcano that will soon begin to spit it's all consuming lava. I know that you are not seeing this because you are immersed in your daily worries. Today, however, I demand your trust. You were convinced already that my prognoses have already proven to be right. If you think differently then drive me out from your midst. However, if you do believe me, then listen to me in this eleventh hour: In the name of God, let anyone of you save himself as long as there is still time. And time there is very little."

She closes the book, her brows furrow with worry as she sees the dejection on my face. "I told you that you were too young to hear this, I shouldn't have read it to you."

"What does it mean Nadja?"

"It means that we should leave Europe and end the Diaspora. It means that we should return to our homeland in *Palestyne*."

I look at the face that perfectly reflects my own. The wide set indigo eyes so like my mother's and the fair hair of my father.

"It's so weird, but Abek told the Rabbi at his school the same thing. He asked the Rabbi if maybe the Nazis weren't a sign from God for the Jews to go home to *Palestyne*."

My sister's eyes appraise me as she considers my revelation, "Abek is a smart little boy. Come we had better get ready for Shabbat. *Tata* will be home soon." Lovingly, she touches the dimple in my chin, an inheritance the three of us share from our father. The Frydman' chin, an identifying feature every Frydman possesses, the gene passes down from father to son and daughter alike. Throughout the generations, it never fails to appear.

My sister stands and looks in the mirror, smoothing her wavy blond hair and straightening her dress that clings to her developing body. Standing beside her, I reflect on our faces, so much alike, yet so different. My chubby cheeks and curve less body are clearly the reflection of a ten-year-old child of innocence.

Looking at my beautiful sister in the mirror, I wonder if I will ever blossom into such a beauty. She is popular with her many friends who congregate in our home on the weekends to listen to records and dance. My relationship with my sister is a typical love-hate sibling rivalry. She loves me, but I seem to be a terrible nuisance. Six years separate our births, yet we share a room and a bed. She yearns for privacy, but I impose myself on her and her friends. Once I had intruded on a soiree and even dared to ask one of her boyfriends to dance. The young man, not wanting to offend, had complied. I was ecstatic as we turned about the room dancing and I pretended not to see the murder in my sister's eyes. She was smoldering with rage as I danced with her boyfriend who towered above me. Finally, unable to bear another minute, she ran from the room and complained to our mother. To my chagrin, I was removed from the room, the door shut in my face.

On Shabbat there is peace between us and together we approach the kitchen as my father returns from *shul*.

"Shabbat Shalom Tata", running to my adored father I wrap my arms around him and I look up at his beaming face; his warm brown eyes alight with pleasure.

Hugging and kissing the top of my head he asks, "Dinale, *Shabbat Shalom* my darling daughter. How was your day at

school? Did *Pani Felzenszwalbe* reveal to you the secrets of the universe?”

“No, but I got an A on my math quiz.”

“Such a smart girl, I am truly a lucky man to have three brilliant children.”

Tata pauses and sighs, his expressive eyes lined with darkness and worry.

“*Tata* you look so tired.”

“I’m fine; it is the world that is not. Come let us pray to God and celebrate Shabbat.”

Taking our places around the beautiful table, we wait for my father to be seated. Our family eats dinner together every evening, but *Shabbos* is especially meaningful and ritualistic. My mother stands to bless and light the candles, her head covered with a beautiful turquoise silk scarf. She covers her face with her hands and sweetly sings the *benchet lecht*¹. Then my father blesses the wine and we all take a small sip. His baritone voice resonates as he blesses the *challah*. He closes his eyes and prays for our greatest wish—peace. “*Amen*,” we murmur in unison as he breaks off pieces of *challah* and passes a piece to each of us. As is his custom, my father opens to a page of the *Tanach*² and reads to us a short story from the Bible. It is comforting to think that in every Jewish home, these ancient traditions and prayers are taking place at the same time. I picture a million prayers taking wing and ascending, the holy letters floating through the ethereal mists to the heavenly throne of God.

1 Blessing over the candles

2 Sacred book of Judaism consisting of the Torah, Prophets, and Hagiographa

With the scent of my mother's cooking drifting through the house to tempt us, my sister and I rise to help carry the first course to table. To begin, my sister carries the whole carp, cut into separate servings. My mother has simmered the fish in a broth of carrots and onions and it steams with a sweet fragrance as she serves each of us. During the fish course, the conversation is kept to a minimum while we carefully dissect the fish from the bones in our mouths. From the age of three, we had been taught how to carefully bone our fish. Yet each of us has experienced the horror of a bone getting caught in our throat and having to be saved by a chunk of *challah* and a firm pat on the back.



Masada Jabotinsky Club 1939. Dina's sister Nadja is seated third from left. On the night of the deportation to Treblinka Nadja's boyfriend ran into her home in the ghetto and rescued the photograph which he carried for the duration of the war.

Having survived the fish course and its obstacle of small bones, we resume the conversation in earnest.

“Nadja,” my father asks, “What do your friends at Club Masada Jabotinsky say about the impending threat of Hitler and the Nazis?”

“We are greatly worried, *Tata*, and believe that the only future for the Jewish people is in the land of *Palestyne*. Many members from other groups have already left for the Promised Land to work on a *kibbutz*¹. *Tata*, I would very much like to make *aliyah*.² I could pave the way for all of us to immigrate. All I need is your blessing.”

“Joel, I will not lose my eldest child,” my mother interjects. “Not with the Nazi’s nearly at our back door. We must remain united as a family and face the coming days together. Besides, Nadja is an exceptional student and we have always considered her a perfect candidate for university. Her teachers all say she should study here in *Radom* and then go to university in *Warszaw*. Who knows? Perhaps she might even study in Switzerland. Joel, you I have always shared that dream for her.”

My father sighs, the lines deepening in his face, “Temcia, please, I have no intention of separating the family at this precarious moment and sending our teenage daughter to an uncertain future in *Palestyne*. It is out of the question; however, I understand her feelings and respect her right to express them.”

“But *Tata*, you yourself once dreamed of leaving Poland and immigrating to America,” my sister pleads. Nadja and her friends, all members of a club that encourages immigration to

1 Kibbutz, cooperative village or community in Israel, where all property is collectively owned and work is organized on a collective basis.

2 When a Jew returns to live in the land of Israel/Palestine

Palestyne, believe the future of the Jewish people lay only in *Palestyne*. For her, “next year in Jerusalem” is not just a prayer recited in the Exodus, but her dream and mantra.

My father exhales, pausing, his eyes focusing on the distant memories of his youth. “Yes, it is true that I once dreamed of leaving,” hesitating, “but it was not to be. Remember Mama?” He turns to his mother drawing her into a shared remembrance, “Remember, when I tried to convince father to let me go? He said it would kill him to lose his only son and he was too old to start again in a new land. He had built a good life for us in Poland and in the end his argument prevailed. I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving you. Since I couldn’t convince you to abandon your life in *Radom*, I remained. I have never regretted that decision until the rise of Hitler and his cronies. When I read his manifesto in *Mein Kampf* it was clear that Hitler’s insanity toward the Jews is dangerous. I never dreamed he would rise to power in the sophisticated intellectual climate of Germany. *Krystallnacht* the Night of Broken Glass shattered the lives of German Jews and any illusions I had. Perhaps I should have stood up to father and left.”

We are all reduced to silence by my father’s unusual confession.

My brother breaks the spell, “But *Tata*, if you didn’t stay in Poland, you wouldn’t have met *Mamashy* and we wouldn’t have been born!”

My father’s eyes clear as he returns to the present. Patting his precocious son on the head, he exclaims, “You are right Abek. Where would I be without my three musketeers?”

My grandmother seizes the opportunity of renewed levity. “Joel, you read too much. It cannot help to read about every

atrocities committed by the anti-Semites. What kind of conversation is this for the *Shabbat* table?"

My father is a keen follower of current events and reads several newspapers in German, Polish, and Yiddish every day. The stress of the Nazi's rise to power has taken a terrible toll on him. Over the years, he has followed Hitler's steady rise and grab for power in Germany, often complaining to his friends of the threat. These same friends would look at him as if he was crazy, "Joel, stop worrying, what is happening in Germany is not going to happen here in Poland." Now, of course, that danger is clear and threatening.

"Mama, this is a far worse threat than some random pogrom. The Nazi threat could affect the safety of every Jew in the world. It is important that the children understand what we are facing, regardless of their ages."

"Son, calm yourself, it will do no good for you to make yourself ill."

"Mama I'm perfectly calm. Please don't worry." My father's voice rises in frustration. "Nadja deserves to voice her views and I want to encourage her quest for knowledge."

My grandmother worries greatly about my father since his heart attack of last year. She and my mother had vigilantly cared for him. Sometimes my grandmother reminds me of a witch-doctor. Her knowledge of herbs and their medicinal attributes seem more effective in their cure than the doctors and their medicines. Often I accompany her into the countryside, following her with a basket that she fills with wild herbs of anise, arnica, basil, chamomile, cloves, fennel, laurel, mint, mustard, sage and wild beet, each with its own particular medicinal properties and application. Once home, she grinds, dries or cooks

the stems and flowers, producing pungent odors throughout the house. These ancient remedies, passed down from generation to generation, become mysterious poultices or syrups that have the benefit of curing whatever wound, ache or illness suffered. Unfortunately, sometimes the noxious cure is worse than the ailment.

None of us could forget my father being confined to bed when my grandmother had suggested that the cure for his heart problems entailed my father drinking a particularly vile concoction mixed with his own urine. My mother and grandmother argued for days over that idea. Finally, after a particularly heated discussion, my grandmother prevailed. They were unaware that I was listening from my favorite place to spy on adult conversation, under the table in the kitchen. Imagine my mother's surprise when her youngest daughter piped in, "I'll never do this; don't you ever try this on me. I would rather die than drink urine!"

Their argument forgotten, my mother and grandmother broke into uproarious laughter, clutching each other. My mother tried to regain her composure to discipline me. "Dina, come out from under the table. You are such a busybody. My goodness, no one is going to make you drink any *pish*¹!"

The more I listen to my sister's arguments, the more my own desire to leave Europe is fired up. "*Tata*, I too want to live in *Pal-estyne*. What if I went with Nadja? Then she wouldn't be alone."

"Me too," interrupts Abek, "I want to go too!"

I glare at my impudent brother. "Abek, you are just a baby. You couldn't live a day without *Mamashy*."

1 Urine, Yiddish

“It’s not true,” my brother whines, “*Tata* tell her that it’s not true.”

“Dina, stop teasing your brother, I want this conversation to end NOW,” my mother warns, irritation in her voice.

My father smiles at his beloved son. “Abek, don’t worry. Dina and Nadja are not going to leave you.”

“Girls, come help me serve the rest of our dinner before it is ruined.” My mother stands as she turned to us. “I will not have us arguing at the *Shabbat* table. It is disrespectful of God.”

My grandmother, who wisely always sides with my mother, adds, “Joel, Temcia is right the family must remain as one. Your dear father, blessed be his memory, would have insisted that we are stronger together than apart.”

My mother rises and Nadja and I follow her into the kitchen.

Returning to the dining room, my sister and I carry the white china bowls rimmed with gold. We are careful not to spill the chicken soup swirling with delicate handmade noodles. We resume our seats and within moments the aroma of chicken broth cleanses the room of negativity.

“*Mamashy*, it is your best soup ever,” I compliment her with the enthusiastic concurrence of everyone at the table.

My mother blushes with pride, reminding me, “Dinale, you say that every time you eat my soup.”

We all laugh at the truth of her observation and I smile in the glow of her approval. Finally, my mother and grandmother serve the braised brisket, surrounded by glazed baby new potatoes and honeyed carrots. It is a meal fit for a king and prepared with love. We sigh with communal satisfaction as our stomachs fill with the luscious food and fine wine.

My mother prides herself on her incredible cooking and baking skills. You can smell the sweet aroma of sugar baking from a block away and my friends are always begging to sample the fruits of her oven. Once a week, she bakes *challahs*, rolls, cakes and cookies for the week ahead. The cakes are laden with fruit and the cookies dripping with sugar.

Tonight, honeyed cake and tea from a silver samovar grace the table. Again, a sigh of satisfaction arises from each of us as we finish the meal, leaving not a crumb on our plates. My favorite part of Shabbat is when we sing in Yiddish, Polish or Hebrew. I close my eyes trying to reach the high notes of tonight's song, "*Beltz, Mayn Shtetele Beltz*¹", a popular song written by Jews who had immigrated to America. Singing slightly off key, we do our best to maintain the melody, our bodies swaying in rhythm.

<i>Azikh tu mir dermonen</i>	<i>So when I recall to myself</i>
<i>Mayne kindershe yorn,</i>	<i>my childhood years,</i>
<i>Punkt vi a kholem</i>	<i>just like a dream.</i>
<i>Zet dos mir oys.</i>	<i>It seems to me</i>
<i>Vizet oys dos hayzele,</i>	<i>how does the little house look,</i>
<i>Vos hot amol geglantzt,</i>	<i>which used to sparkle with lights?</i>
<i>Tzi vakst nokh dos beyemele,</i>	<i>Does the little tree grow still</i>
<i>Vos ikh hob farflantzt?</i>	<i>Which I planted long ago?</i>
<i>Rerfrain:</i>	<i>Refrain:</i>
<i>Oy, oy, oy Belts, mayn shtetele Belts,</i>	<i>Beltz, my little town of Beltz</i>
<i>Mayn heyemele, vu ikh hob</i>	<i>The little house where</i>
<i>Mayne kindershe yorn farbrakht.</i>	<i>I spent my childhood!</i>
<i>Belts, mayn shtetele Belts,</i>	<i>Beltz, my little town of Beltz</i>

1 Written by Alexander Olshanetsky and Jacob Jacobs

<i>In ormen shtibele,</i>	<i>The poor little room,</i>
<i>Mit ale kinderlekh dort gelakht.</i>	<i>Where I used to laugh with other</i>
	<i>children.</i>
<i>Oy, eden Shabes fleg ikh loyfn</i>	<i>Every Shabes I would run</i>
<i>Mit ale inglekhn tzuglaykh</i>	<i>with all the other children</i>
<i>Tzuzitzn unter dem grinen beymele,</i>	<i>to sit under a little green tree,</i>
<i>Leynen bay dem taikhto</i>	<i>read by the river bank</i>
<i>Oyo y oy Belts,</i>	<i>Oh oh oh Beltz</i>
<i>Mayn shtetele Belts,</i>	<i>My little town of Beltz</i>
<i>Mayn heymele, vu kh'hob gehat</i>	<i>My little home where I had</i>
<i>Di sheyne khaloymes a sakh.</i>	<i>So many fine dreams.</i>
<i>Dos shtibl is alt,</i>	<i>The little house is old</i>
<i>Bavaksn mit mokh</i>	<i>overgrown with moss.</i>
<i>Dos shtibl is alt,</i>	<i>the little house is old</i>
<i>In fentzter keyn gloz</i>	<i>no glass in the windows</i>
<i>Dos shtibl is alt,</i>	<i>the little house is old</i>
<i>Tzeboygn di vent,</i>	<i>the walls are bent</i>
<i>Ikh volt shoyn zikher</i>	<i>I would surely</i>
<i>Dos vider nit derkent</i>	<i>not recognize it again.</i>

Once we exhaust our repertoire of songs, we are whisked from the table to prepare for bed. My mother, sister, and grandmother remain to clear the table and restore the kitchen to orderliness.

My brother and I brush our teeth and wait for my parents and grandmother to come and kiss us goodnight. Once the comforting rituals and kisses are complete, my brother, who sleeps in my parents' room, is asleep in minutes, while I lay listening to the muted conversations that drift from the kitchen. Beneath my snowy down comforter, I try to fight off sleep, waiting for

my sister to join me. Finally, I feel her slip beneath the covers. Turning to cuddle with her and warm her feet, I beg forgiveness for whatever transgression I might have committed recently and she lovingly forgives me with a hug.

“Nadja, I whisper, “Do you think the Germans are going to attack Poland?”

My sister sighs snuggling closer. “I’m not sure; maybe they are just rattling their swords to scare us. If they do attack, it won’t be good for any of us. Maybe, just maybe, if they do invade, the rest of the world will denounce them and declare war on them. If we’re lucky, we can survive their domination until we are liberated by the democracies that are sure to come to our rescue.”

I yawn and my eyes grow heavy. “I hope you are right, I don’t want our world to change.” Seeking the comfort and safe harbor of my sagacious sister, I nestle in her arms and nod off to a peaceful sleep.

In the morning, I jump from bed, disturbing my sister’s peaceful slumber. “Dina, stop with the jumping I’m trying to sleep.”

“It’s Saturday, Nadja. Get up sleepyhead. It’s a beautiful day, the sun is shining, the birds are singing and we are free to do whatever we want.” I giggle as I throw a pillow at her.

“Go away!” She buries her head beneath the covers as I race to get dressed, eager to meet Fela in the courtyard. Saturdays are carefree days for us to play as children. Fela and I planned a morning walk to the apple orchard behind our building.

As promised, Fela is waiting for me downstairs. Walking arm in arm through the courtyard, we make our way onto the sidewalk, my eyes adjusting to the light. The shops are closed for Shabbat, but the streets are full of people walking to synagogue

or en route to visit friends and family. Fela and I slip into the stream of passersby and make our way to the apple orchard. We love the orchard, with its massive trees laden with sweet fruit. The orchard is our secret haven where Fela and I give voice to our dreams.

We pick some apples, and then sit down, planting our backs against a tree. The dappled morning light filtering through leaves dances around us in a rainbow of colors and shadows. Taking a bite from my apple, I wipe away the sweet juice that runs down my chin. "Mmm...these apples are so good," I say, wiping away the sugary liquid with the back of my hand.

"I know," says Fela. "I love this orchard. It's so peaceful. Sometimes I feel like there is no other world than this our secret hide-away where nothing bad can happen. I feel the same way when we visit my grandparents' cherry orchard in the summer."

Laying my apple aside, I confide, "I can't wait to grow up and do whatever I please. I am definitely going to live in *Palestyne*. When Nadja goes, I will find a way to follow her, even if I have to run away. Last night, I told my father I want to go to *Palestyne* with Nadja. So, what do you think of that?"

Fela looks at me with the eyes of a sage. "You are dreaming. There is no way your parents will ever let you go. Ten year olds don't leave their families to go halfway across the world. You can tell your father anything you like, but there is no way he will ever let you go. I bet he said no to your sister and she is sixteen."

I sigh, nodding, knowing she is right. Why dream when the world is falling apart? As I fight the frustrations warring within me, I suggest, "Fela, let's make a pact between us, a sacred promise."

She looks at me, her eyes narrowing, a slight smile teasing the corners of her mouth. "What kind of promise?"

Jumping up, I pull her to her feet. I begin to dance around in circles, spinning her with me as I shout, "That we will be friends forever and that after the war, if there is a war, we will go and live in *Palestyne*, and we will pick olives and live on a kibbutz, and swim in the blue waters of the Mediterranean, and marry handsome boys with olive skin, and...oh, I don't know ... we will just live and be happy."

Fela and I spin around and around, the sound of our laughter filling the air with the delicate music of our youth. "Promise me, Fela, promise me!" The orchard is a dizzying blur of light and shadow flying around us as we spin faster and faster.

"I promise, I promise!" Fela shouts now infected with my enthusiasm. "We will be friends forever, and plow fields and plant crops, and marry farmers! Whatever you want--- just stop spinning. I am getting so dizzy."

Our laughter echoes in the quiet of the orchard. I let go of her hands and we fall dizzily to the ground, my eyes to the sky, my heart pounding within my chest. The trees and sky spin around me out of control until my eyes adjust and slowly my balance returns. I cannot help but think that the world as we know it also is spinning out of control and silently I pray that it too will regain its balance.

We lay under the blossoming apple trees for an hour eating apples and watching the clouds as they race across the August sky, content in each other's company. I jump up, offering Fela my hand and pull her to her feet. "Let's go, or we will be late for

the movies and I better make sure that the nudge, Abek, is ready to go.”

“I almost forgot about the movies,” Fela says, brushing the dirt from her dress, “Abek’s a good boy, I don’t mind if he comes with us. We better hurry though. I have to run home and get some zlotys¹.”

My sister has promised to take Fela and me to a movie, a special treat. I am madly in love with Shirley Temple and never miss one of her films. She is the biggest star in the world and all of her movies are subtitled so we can understand them. I, like millions of girls around the world, dream of being Shirley Temple, with her dancing ringlets and doll-like face. It is the perfect Saturday treat for us and it allows my parents to have some private time together, which they certainly deserve.

“I’ll race you back,” I challenge.

“Go!” Fela yells, as she takes off like the wind, her hair streaming behind her. Picking another apple, I run after her as fast as I can, knowing I can catch her.

The Little Princess is such a wonderful story about Sarah Crewe, a little girl who refuses to believe that her father has been killed in the Boer War. With courage and tenacity, she endures terrible hardships determined to find her dear papa. A timely tale for all of us, it ends with her being reunited with her father. Sarah’s perseverance, her love and belief that she will find her papa, drives the story. Her ability to rise above and weather the obstacles in her path makes this film particularly poignant. A desirable escape from our world suffering through a depression and on the verge of war, the movie evokes strong emotions. Fela and

¹ Polish currency

I sniffle away. We are totally engrossed in the fairytale on the screen. Even Abek manages to remain silent instead of voicing his usual observations throughout the film.

After the movie, my sister, brother, and I walk arm-in-arm to the ice-cream store for a special indulgence, a delicious ice-cream cone made with the freshest of cream. The ice-cream store is filled with families and young adults enjoying the warm summer afternoon. Nadja leaves us sitting by ourselves with our cones at a small table while she says hello to her friends across the parlor. I scrutinize the behavior of the young adults and their flirtations. Fela asks, "Is that your sister's boyfriend, Mikal?"

Licking my cone, I shrug my shoulders. "I think he is one of them. She has so many. All the boys seem to be in love with her."

Fela sighs. "It must be wonderful to be so beautiful and have so many admirers. Do you think we will ever be surrounded by handsome young men competing for our attention?"

"I don't know about you," I teased, "but I will have so many admirers that I will probably have to shake a stick at them to fend them off."

"Oh Dina, you are such a silly goose. What do you think they are talking about?"

"Politics, of course. That's all anyone ever talks about now."

"What do you think the Nazi's will do to us if they invade and take Poland?"

"I don't know, but I hope they expel us. I hope they send us all to *Palestyne*. I don't want to live where I am not wanted." I am repeating the words I had heard so many times from my sister at the dinner table. I watch my sister, surrounded by the eager

faces of her friends, all eyes glued to her and hanging on her every word.

Walking home, the serenity of Shabbat permeates the air, filling it with the golden radiance of the afternoon sun. I cannot help but feel hopeful that peace might yet be a possibility.

Back home, my parents announce we are taking a sunset walk in the park before we bid farewell to *Shabbat* and have dinner. My Aunt Mindale, her husband Tuvye, and my cousins Nadja and Majer are meeting us.

In that last flush of summer, my cousins and I trail the adults as they walk in the park, occasionally greeting neighbors and friends. I look up at the stately chestnut trees, their branches forming a canopy of shade. The path glows with flickering light that cascades down between the leaves searching for a final resting place on the ground. The rose bushes burst with a profusion of pink, white, and red, scenting the air with their perfume. The park is filled with families escaping the confines of their homes and the barrage of bad news from their radios. Children dash about, their laughter resonating in the air. Here and there, I catch a word or two of the adult's conversation.

"Joel, I think we should prepare for the worst," warns my Uncle Tuvye.

"There is no question that you are right Tuvye. Temcia and I have stockpiled medicine and food in preparation of an invasion."

"Mindale and I have done the same, though no matter what we store, I am afraid that it won't be enough."

"I feel the noose tightening around us," adds my Aunt, "but I am most fearful for the children. God knows what sacrifices will be forced upon them."

As I try to listen to the adults, Majer grabs my hair pulling it. "Majer," I scream, "Stop it!"

Letting go and running from me, Majer sprints, as I follow in hot pursuit with fury coursing through my veins.

"Majer," Nadja commands threateningly, "Leave Dina alone!"

Glaring at his sister, Majer freezes in his tracks, kicking at a stone in the path. My sister's arms encircle me, catching me in mid-flight just as I am about to pounce on my pesky cousin.

"You certainly don't act like a boy who is soon to be a Bar Mitzvah and become a man. Here, come walk with Nadja and me."

Reluctantly, Majer complies with his sister's request. "You always ruin my fun. You're not the boss you know."

Sighing Nadja rumples the unruly mass of dark curls framing her brother's face.

Excited to join the older girls, I push myself between my sister and cousin happy for an excuse to walk with them.

The two Nadjas, who had been walking together conspiratorially, are now forced to part. Linking arms in the dwindling sunshine, we walk. As quiet as a fly on a wall, I listen as the older girls talk, hoping for a juicy tidbit to share with Fela. The girls, well aware of my nosiness, continue with the most mundane of conversation that fills me with boredom within minutes

Saying our good-byes in the growing twilight, the Frydman's and the Finkelstein's return to their respective homes to bid farewell to Shabbat.

We stop at the bakery across the street to pick up the *cholent*¹ that had been left to slowly braise in the massive ovens. On Fridays, the women bring their clay pots filled with different variations of the traditional stew to the local bakeries where the ingredients slowly simmer for twenty-four hours in the ovens. The flavorful stews of beans, potatoes, meats, and spices infuse the air with an aroma we can smell from a block away. In this way, God's commandment to rest and not work on the Sabbath is kept until the *Havdalah*, a closing ritual that ends the holiday and is performed by all observant Jews.

Evening falls an hour after sundown and we stand in the courtyard of our building as my father searches for the first three stars visible in the heavens.

"There *Tata*, there!" Abek points to the darkening sky.

"Good Abek, the first three stars to appear in God's heavens. The hour of farewell to *Shabbat* has come."

He lifts the wine glass and murmurs the prayer to celebrate the renewal of the spiritual. My father likes to explain the meaning of each ritual so his children will learn to perform the sacred acts and carry their meaning within their hearts.

"You see children, like the transformation of grapes to wine; we are transformed by our dedication to the ritual of *Shabbat* from the physical world to the divine realms. *Shabbat* is when the Lord opens his arms to his children."

Then my father says the prayer over the spice box filled with cloves and passes it under each of our noses so we can inhale the sweet aroma and fill our hearts with meaning and understanding of our traditions.

1 A slowly braised stew of Spanish Sephardic descent

“The Kabbalists say that on Shabbat we are given an extra soul, allowing us to reach greater spirituality. When Shabbat ends this extra spirituality returns to God. By smelling the spices we are comforted in knowing that our extra soul will return when we celebrate Shabbat once more.”

In the twilight, my father lights the braided double candle and says the prayer over the brightly burning flame. “Children, according to the Talmud, Adam became distraught on the sixth day of creation when on Friday evening night descended and the world was cloaked in darkness. The next evening, not wanting Adam to feel lonely, God gave him the gift of fire, the first light of creation so he would know he was not forgotten. In this way, we are reminded of our commitment to God and his commitment to us and we ask for his continued protection and light.”

Performing the final ritual, he pours wine into the Kiddush cup until it overflows onto a plate. “You see children how the wine overflows? This symbolizes our hope and prayer that the blessing of *Shabbat* will overflow into our lives and last throughout the week.”

As the evening shadows envelope the courtyard, he recites the last blessing of the *Havdalah* service. We bid farewell to Shabbat with a final “Amen.”