

Making Them Pay

This is a piece of historical fiction. Some liberties have been taken, either due to creative license or a shortage of available information.

I slap away the hand that wakes me as I return from the land of nightmares that I visit nightly. There was a slight variation in my dreams tonight. This time, they featured countless versions of my imminent death.

"Your turn on watch," Fauber tells me, and he proceeds to hobble over to the edge of the bunker, clearly exhausted. Everyone is, and has been since they stepped foot in the Warsaw Ghetto.

I sit up off the hard ground and stare toward the entrance of our tiny bunker. Fauber, me, and the two other boys in our bunker were all originally staying in other bunkers in the ghetto. Once they started filling up, we were forced to quickly make one of our own. If too many people were seen coming from one, the Germans would get suspicious.

My head starts to droop, but I shake myself awake-no falling asleep. I mutter the *Sh'ma* and *Va'ahafta* under my breath. After living through these years of hell, I'm not sure if I believe in God anymore. There's not much time for philosophy when you could die any day. But it's nice to have a sense of routine. And it reminds me of home.

Home. It's been so long. Four and a half years since Poland was invaded, three and a half years I've been in this ghetto. With every breath, I feel the ache Kraków has left in my heart. The chilling winds at my back as I walk with my friends. The smell of Mama's *latkes* waiting for me when I get home. Alena's laughter as I paraded her

around the town on my back. Oh, Alena, my beloved sister. It might be my fault you died, but I am forever glad you aren't here. And I will make them pay for what they did to you.

I silently walk to the corner of the bunker and lift the scraps of ruined fabric that conceal our treasures. One hand pistol, gifted to Fauber by the ŻOB, a couple of homemade grenades, and our personal valuables. Photos of people we have no idea are still alive, Star of David necklaces, and a few others. I root around until I find my watch.

The watch is the last tangible thing from my old life. A few months before I was ten, I was walking with Mama and Alena past a store window full of watches. At the time, I thought that watches made for real men, and I begged and pleaded like a brat despite knowing we couldn't afford one. Still, Mama worked long hours so that she could afford it. On the day of my tenth birthday, I cried at the sight of it. I wore the watch all over town for a week before narrowly avoiding some older boys trying to jump me for it. "Go back to Palestine!" the kids yelled at me as I ran home, tears flying off my face. I never wore it again, instead hiding it under my bed, often bringing it out to look at. When the Germans knocked on our door, I grabbed it and stuffed it in my undergarments, determined to hold onto it. The leather is worn, the surface scratched, but it has somehow made it.

5:17. The sun won't rise until around 6:30, so there's still some time left on my watch. I'm about to put back the watch when the calendar across the room catches my eye. *April 19th*. Tomorrow is Pesach. The hole Kraków has left in me stings a little

harder as I tie my watch around my wrist. I have a strange feeling that I will need it today.

We pass around the meager amount of stale bread, our breakfast. I know that Jezek, one of the other boys in our bunker, holds fast to his beliefs and will not resort to leavened bread during Pesach, even if it means illness or death. Fauber, Anselm, and I will continue to stuff our faces with whatever we can find.

No one speaks as the bread slowly disappears into the pits of our ever-hungry stomachs. Almost no one in the ghetto speaks, other than the small children and the Germans. And nothing they say is good.

Fauber suddenly breaks the silence. "I overheard something. It might not be true. But they may be restarting deportations today."

The bread falls with a silent thud from my hands as the shock sets in. The silence is palpable in the stuffy room. *Not again. Not again.* I pick up the bread and ask, "Who told you that?"

"Mordecai," he grimly replied. If we hadn't already hit rock bottom, we just slammed against it. Mordecai Anielewicz is the head of the ŻOB, one of the two major underground military groups in the ghetto. Our entire bunker, except Jezek, is affiliated, but Fauber is higher in the ranks, mainly through having gone to the same synagogue as Mordecai. Jezek started chanting the *Kiddush*, and we all join in. My mind is elsewhere, though.

I've excelled in blocking pictures out of my brain, things that I never want to see again. But one of the only pictures I can't block out is the day Mama was sent to

Treblinka. It was last summer, one of the last days when the sun felt warm on my face. Mama had gotten sick; she had always had breathing problems, but they were so much worse than usual. That morning, a German had knocked on our apartment door, and we knew it was time. It was brief, much too brief. She had squeezed me tightly, and I cried into her shoulder as she rubbed my back. *It's okay, Izaak*, she had comforted me. Mama went silently, refusing to look them in the eye. Our five other roommates had hung their heads before moving on, while I stood up, wiped away my tears, and carried on, like I knew she would have wanted me to. Not one of those roommates are still here in the ghetto, though; they have all met Mama's fate.

When the bread is finished, we all stand up and wait as Fauber goes to the entrance and peeks out. He motions that it's clear, and slowly we disperse into the light. The breeze is still present, but it's less sharp than usual. Finally, it almost feels like spring.

Just as Anselm leaves and locks up the bunker, I notice the sounds of stomping in the distance. "What's that?" I ask, but I am already sure I know.

I am proven correct; Germans. There are thousands of them, walking toward us in organized lines. "They are probably here to make sure deportations go as planned," Anselm points out. We all solemnly nod our heads in agreement. In January, when they tried to start deportations again, the ŻOB had snuck in and opened fire. Most of them had been killed, but the Jews being sent to Lublin had managed to escape. It was around then that the resistance groups started telling everyone to make bunkers; it was then that the residents of the Warsaw ghetto began to prepare for war.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a young boy who couldn't have been older than ten running to us. As he comes into focus, I can see that he's limping on one side. My eyes widen as another one of those unwanted pictures forces its way into my conscience.

It was before I had come to Warsaw, not long before Poland was invaded. I was twelve at the time, and I had many new responsibilities. One was making sure Alena didn't leave the house without Mama. At seven, she was quite the adventurer, and she hated being stuck inside. However, when I was busy listening to the radio, she had managed to sneak out. When I realized she was gone, I raced outside, running to the park near our house. Her wails heard from a distance still haunt my ears. When I found her, her leg was bloody, clearly broken from falling out of a tree. I had rushed her home, and Mama had been able to fix most of it with tight bandages. She was on bed rest for weeks. And she still was when the Germans came to Poland. They had deemed her useless, as she was too injured to be taken to a ghetto or camp, and had taken her before I could say goodbye.

I barely hear the words the little boy is telling me, but his urgent tone knocks me out of my daze. "Mordecai says we're fighting. Go get your weapons, it's time!" The messenger runs off without another word, off to inform more of the ŻOB.

Fauber addresses us, "You heard the kid. Anselm, Izaak, go into the bunker, get me my pistol and the grenades. Anselm, you can take a grenade. Izaak, you're too young. Try to take on smaller, disarmed guys in hand-to-hand combat. Jezek, you don't have to fight if you don't want to. If you want to team up with Izaak, great. If not, fine, just stay in the bunker. I'll try to hold them off while you guys go in. *Mazel tov.*" We all tell

him *mazel tov* as well, before we go back into the bunker. *Mazel tov* typically means congrats, but it also means good luck. We're gonna need it.

Anselm unlocks the bunker with trembling hands, and we all enter as one. On this fatal, subdued morning, you couldn't tell there was a single person in here. Anselm scoops up the pistol and grenade, as well as his Star of David chain, and leaves without a word. Guess I don't need to grab anything. I watch as Jezek sits down on the ground and brings his head to his knees. "I'm staying here."

"Really? You could do a lot of damage out there. You're really strong," I tell him, trying to persuade him to join me. I don't want to face this alone.

"That's the thing," he whispers. "I don't want to hurt anybody."

"What are you talking about? Have you not been here in the past years? Any damage we do will never match up to what they have done to us. I know you don't like trouble, but this is *good* trouble. Necessary trouble."

"I know that," Jezek says, passion cutting his voice raw. "I've seen it all the same as you have. They've broken me beyond repair. All of that makes them the bad guys. But if I hurt someone, if, if I *kill* someone? Then I'm the bad guy in this story. I won't let that happen. They don't get to have that."

His words ring true, but I bury that feeling. "Okay, fine. Stay here and hide instead of helping your friends. But I'm going to fight, and I will avenge everyone they've taken from me." He doesn't react, just sits there. That only makes me madder, so I leave without another word.

When I come into the light, it's pure chaos. I see so many Jews on the ground, knocked out or worse. I don't recognize all of their faces, which makes me feel guilty

beyond imagination. *More people I need to avenge.* I quickly recite the Mourner's Kaddish under my breath, as no one else will for them. I hear an explosion in the distance, and I immediately think of Anselm. I never told him goodbye. Have I forever lost that chance?

I start running, my legs full of adrenaline, without knowing where I'm going. I just need to get away. *Find a disarmed German,* I remind myself, Fauber's words playing in my mind. I don't realize I've tripped until I'm on the ground, palms and knees scraped and bleeding, but nothing severely injured. I looked behind me to see what I had tripped on, only to fall again in shock. It's Fauber.

I avert my eyes. I can't bring myself to look at him. He had always been clinical with us, held us at arm's length, but he was like the older brother I had never had. My only father figure, I suppose. I start chanting the Mourner's Kaddush, louder this time. I don't care if I am found anymore.

As I stand up to walk away, I see something on Fauber's person shine. It's his pistol. I grab it as I enter a trance. I walk without urgency, holding it in front of me. I've never held a weapon like this before. It feels powerful.

I look up and see a German soldier running in my direction, armed with a pistol not unlike mine. His face is bruised and bleeding, and he doesn't look much older than me. At this moment, I have one thought in my head; *this is where I avenge everyone. Mama, Faubar, Alena. This is where we'll win.*

I stop at the same time he does, and we lock eyes. Synonymously, we raise our weapons. He looks ready, but his eyes are wide. I wonder if he's done this before. My

eyes are wide too. But when I look down, my hand is shaking. *Stop it*, I tell myself. *You can't miss.*

Of course, my conscience chooses now to remember Jezek's parting words. *If I kill someone, I'm the bad guy.* I realize he was completely right. The Germans and the Nazis deserve everything they've done to us, and worse. But my conscience won't let me be the one to deliver their punishment. Leave this trouble to the people like Fauber and Anselm, who can handle it. I can't. I *can't*.

I look at my watch, tightly fastened on my wrist. I'm sorry, Mama. I won't avenge you, but you are not forgotten. And Alena. My beautiful sister. I won't be the one to make them pay, but I know in my heart you wouldn't want me to. And I can't wait to see you again.

I drop my weapon, and I smile.

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