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The Midwife from Lodz

In the summer of 1944 the Russian Army halted the offensive and sat passive on the other side of the Vistula River watching the slaughter by the Nazis of the Polish insurgents in Warsaw. Ninety miles from Warsaw the liquidation of Lodz- Ghetto started in July and reached its final stage at the end of August.

The number of “volunteers” for deportation decreased each day and the Gestapo started their “actions,”- the roundups- by removing Jews from their apartments by force. The “actions” always came suddenly and were performed with the precision of a Swiss watch, reinforced by the experience the Nazis acquired with each passing day. The familiar picture of a swarm of armed Gestapo men in green uniforms standing with their legs wide apart, in battle readiness at the corner of the streets, of the Jewish police dispersed to the buildings in search of Ghetto dwellers, and of the trucks waiting for the victims was a part of the landscape in July and August 1944, the last months of Lodz- Ghetto existence. And the noise! The cries and screams of the Jews removed from their homes together with the barking commands “raus,raus” formed a terrifying cacophony.

It was a warm August in 1944. The pleasant weather facilitated the hunting expeditions and the Gestapo found Jews almost without a miss. On one of those beautiful summer days my mother needed to reconnect with the relatives. There wasn’t food in the house, not a slice of bread or even the brown ersatz coffee that gave a sense of being sated when eaten dry with brown sugar. Mother avoided the open streets and moved like a cat through the courtyards, cellars and attics. She knew the ghetto like the palm of her hand for her patients once lived here. An old pass from the Department of Health, allowing her to move freely during the curfew, of little help if stopped by the Nazis, gave her some kind of false security.

I was alone. The lonely man who had lived in the kitchen had been deported the month before. Not a trace was left of him, only the narrow, bare bed he had used.

Soon our room would look like his, I thought, and nobody would know of us, of our life, of our struggle, of our death. We'll have no names, we'll become statistics. Will future occupants of this building lead normal lives within these silent walls? Will they make love in this room? Will children play in the streets where the Nazis are now dragging people to their death? Will laughter be heard here again?" Such thoughts frequently occupied me.

The empty bed made me aware how little I knew about the man who shared our apartment with us for two years. The Ghetto was a place where friendship was in short supply and hunger admitted no human bond.

I looked at our room with its big closet and the old clock which had stopped telling time. Time was now measured from one roundup to another. Above the unmade bed a huge painting of "Solomon and his wives" covered the wall. The well-rounded figures of the biblical wives with opulent breasts looked obscene in the cluttered and cold room. It was almost too painful to look at them on an empty stomach. I stared at myself in the big mirror standing between the two windows; my dress hung on me like one on a hanger.

Once again I surveyed the room. A heavy couch in the corner showed its wiry interior which made deep marks on my back after a night's sleep and the old, black stove stood useless and cold. On the table "All Quiet on the Western Front" waited for a reader.

These things will outlast us, I thought. With envy I looked at the table and the closet. When my eyes rested on the painting of Solomon and his wives, I said aloud "No, not you. You're too Jewish. You'll be replaced by the picture of Madonna and Christ."

Suddenly I heard a commotion in the courtyard. **The roundup had started.** Through the window I saw the familiar sight of the Gestapo at the corner of the street. My blood raced to my brain but my brain was no longer capable of sending signals to the legs. I wanted to run but my feet were glued to the floor. My heart was pounding ready to explode. I could hear my rapid breathing and fear, a paralyzing fear was oozing from every cell of my body.

I thought: “Should I write a farewell note? What can I write when I am all nerves? Should I take some clothing? Yes, but where is my clothing?” I grabbed the toothbrush from the table and put it in the pocket.

Aloud I said, “They’ll take me and I’m hungry. Not a slice of bread is in the house, nothing.”

My mind raced from one idea to another and I decided, “No, they’ll not find me so easily. Where can I hide? The closet, the big closet. Sally, please-I begged myself- quiet down and move. Take the book with you and read, read. Read till they’ll come to take you.”

In the closet I read *All Quiet on the Western Front* trying to detach myself from the events in the streets but my sharpened ear heard the heavy stampeding on the stairs. Then I heard the police shout,” The building is clean, nobody’s left. Let’s go.”

I thought I smelled the odor of the people taken to the trucks but it was my own odor of fear. Now all the commotion, yelling and screaming and roaring of the trucks ceased; a deadly silence fell upon the street. In this silence I started to cry and my tears wetted the famous book.

I couldn’t cry for the people who were taken brutally away. I cried for my own life, for my unfulfilled dreams, for the love I might never know, and most of all I cried for my mother.

“They didn’t find you. Good girl.” My mother touched my face as if not believing her own eyes, “ I have some news,” she said “The Nazis are leaving a few hundred Jews to clean the ghetto, and your uncle Mel, who is now a manager of the stable offered us the job to clean the stable and to take care of the horses. Horses are benign animals. We have a chance to be together for awhile, if we’re lucky.”

Before moving out, my father, a hard working and frugal man, smashed his lifework, the sum of his dreams, the furniture. First went the paralyzed clock while I looked with a renewed interest at all the elaborate internal mechanisms, now in pieces. With a hammer

he struck the big mirror and the flying refracting crystals shone like diamonds in the sun on this perfect summer day. With the last force of a blinded Samson he threw the heavy couch out from the third floor window. The flying couch hit the ground with a canon-like blast. My father still hadn't satisfied his anger and looked for more objects to demolish.

I took on the task of destroying the painting of Solomon while the book, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, flew like a bird through the window. The thunder of the falling heavy objects didn't cause any reaction. No one came to the open windows. No one asked,"Mr. Herschenberg, what happened? What are you doing throwing out a good couch? And books? You must be crazy." There were no racing steps, no curious faces. The tenants were on their way to Auschwitz. This was my father's way of protesting against the silence of the world, against the futility of his life's efforts, against bonding with material objects, against Hitler, against Nazis, against God.

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We left the building and went to a newly formed camp to join about six hundred Jews selected as cleaners of Lodz-Ghetto. In that camp my mother approached Mel.

"I'll not stand for the morning roll call. Look at me; I am so thin, so emaciated that I'll be the first victim for deportation. Tomorrow is the selection day."

"The Nazis have a prepared list of people for deportation and your hiding is hopeless. It may endanger our lives too. Don't tell me what do you want to do; I' m better off if I don't know your plans." Mel was irritated and raised his voice.

"Even so, no power will drag me to the morning roll call."

I looked at my mother and realized that she was right. Grayish, parchment like skin covered the bones of her face and her black eyes rimmed by prominent puffs sat deep in their sockets. The head was attached to a body of a child. No doubt, she'll catch the Nazis' eyes. Mel must have had a second thought for he repeated,"Do what you wish. I don't want to know."

It was another sunny morning when we stood in a double row shivering from the first cold and the tense atmosphere in the courtyard. From a prepared list the Germans called out loudly the names of persons designed for deportation. Suddenly the name “Rose Herschenberg.” hit my ear. **My mother!**

A thousand thoughts moved with the speed of light through my head, “They’ll start a search for her, they’ll find her, and they’ll kill her on the spot”. I whispered to myself. A horror movie of a Nazi hunt with guns and dogs and my mother’s bloody body exposed in the courtyard was rolling under my eyelids.

What to do? Where’s my father? I was blinded by panic for my father was actually close by, totally shocked by the events.

“Mel,” I whispered. “No, he’s of no help.” I saw his stony face.

The rows of Jews on the morning call stirred impatiently like a small wave. You don’t play with the Nazis and you don’t let the Nazis wait. We looked at each other but nobody budged.

This time the German shouted: **“ROSE HERSCHENBERG!”**

A tall woman with gray hair whose face I couldn’t see walked slowly toward the group of people assigned for deportation. All the adrenaline leaked out of my body leaving me with cotton legs and a buzzing in the head. Now I saw my father, and in his of blood-drained face I saw a reflection of my own.

Later, my mother said, “I would have gone to the front line the first time the Nazi called my name. I didn’t know that there was another Rose Herschenberg in our camp.”
I never asked where she had hid but I knew that the safest place was in the stable, between the horses, “the benign animals.”

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In late fall a man secretly came to the camp. He and his wife had hidden in one of the abandoned buildings in the ghetto. He had prepared the hideout anticipating the liquidation of Lodz-Ghetto. He came in the darkness of the night, for his wife was bleeding to death after giving birth to a boy.

“Help me,” he begged the Jewish commandant of the camp,”Do you have a doctor here?”

“Yes, he’s a well known surgeon in Lodz. Let’s go to him.” They approached the famous and highly respected doctor.

“You don’t expect me to risk my life” the doctor said, visibly agitated and shaken. “The Nazis are roaming the streets at night with dogs looking for the hiding Jews, like you. In camp I have a fraction of hope to survive. Going with you is a suicide.”

The surgeon’s wife didn’t leave the room; she stood behind the husband and fully supported his position. Finally, the unwelcomed young father left the room.

“He’s right and I cannot order him to go with you,” said the commandant. “But wait. We have a midwife in the camp, let’s try, but it’s a slim chance.”

Rose, my mother, the skinny, scared woman, a far cry from “mother-courage” was the last resort. I couldn’t understand why she agreed to take the dangerous journey. The call of duty? The pained eyes of the husband? My mother wasn’t under normal circumstances a risqué taking person, but there were not ordinary times. She left the camp with the night visitor and disappeared into the labyrinth of empty streets. The dark, wide-open windows of the abandoned buildings slammed by the cold wind looked like the eye of Cyclops. They walked cautiously but every step could be heard meters away in the empty streets.

In a filthy, well camouflaged cellar my mother examined the heavily bleeding woman, removed the retained placenta by an ungloved and not too clean hand. She waited till the bleeding stopped, checked the baby, and then returned to the camp alone.

“Sally,” she reported, and her face radiated with pride,”it’s a healthy and beautiful baby- boy. I am concerned about the sterility. But in obstetrics one cannot predict the outcome. Sometimes you spit in the wound and nothing happens and another time you maintain one hundred percent sterility and a full blown infection follows. I must see her again.”

“Oh no, Ma, it’s not an after-delivery visit; it’s a dangerous journey. You’re tempting death. The surgeon had enough common sense to refuse. Besides the woman was foolish to go pregnant in hiding. It’s a double ticket to death. I don’t understand how in the midst of hunger, destruction and deportation one gets pregnant? ” I reprimanded my mother as though I were twenty five years her senior and not the other way around.

My mother answered, “The drive of intimacy is very strong even in the lowest human conditions although hunger made a lot of us asexual. The husband is a very courageous and intelligent man and he didn’t follow the herd to the train station for a journey to … who knows, it seems to me like death. He prepared the hiding place to the last detail, he has electric power, water, and even a small radio.The baby has more chances to survive than we have. We are exposed here in camp and are an easy target for a mass execution while the baby, with a little luck, may live. You don’t see something symbolic in this delivery?”

“No, I see a danger to your life and I’m not interested in symbols.”

I wanted to scare and pain my mother, to tell her: You left me alone once to my own fate. Please don’t do it again. Don’t let me die without you and don’t let me survive without you. Don’t go.” I was well aware of my own thoughts but I had to put a clamp on my emotions to stop the out pouring of the resentment for the people in the hideout.

“What?” My mother, as though listening through a stethoscope, was aware of my innermost thoughts, “you have a fixation that I’m risking my life. I don’t run between shooting squads; our life in the camp is riskier. The Nazis took away from us the rights to be pregnant and to bear children. I ‘m fully trained to deliver babies, and babies are the promise of life”

My mother made a second visit, alone. She came back beaming with joy and with a loaf of bread. The mother and the baby were doing well which proved again that the impossible was sometimes possible in Lodz-Ghetto.

"Why did you take bread from the man?" I asked. "We have enough food in the camp."

"He insisted on giving me something for the services and I took the only thing which in the ghetto had the value of life. The baby is laughing a lot and crying very little, a smart baby he's. He'll see a better world without Hitlers and the Nazis."

My mother delivered another baby in the camp. The woman was so slim that no one recognized that she was in an advanced stage of pregnancy.

Her husband came straight to my mother, having learned that the surgeon under the watchful eye of his wife would absolutely refuse to help. In the camp all news traveled very fast. The woman's bed was put in a dark corner in the hall of the women's' quarter. I sat nearby and heard a slight commotion behind the improvised curtain, the husband's whispers and my mother's quiet voice "Easy, easy." No groan or moan. There were only my mother's quick steps and latter a weak cry, a chirp. Then there was a total silence behind the curtain.

The women didn't sleep. The air was heavy with tension and fear and smelled faintly of blood. In the early morning it was no trace of the event and no trace of the baby. The bed was in its usual position and the woman was asleep.

All sighed with relief and no one asked questions. The woman went to her usual work assignment with a deathly face; her husband was silent and a shade paler.

My mother came to me in tears and said, "but the boy, the baby-boy in the cellar, he'll survive. You'll see, he'll survive."

On January 17, 1945 the Red Army began its final push to Berlin, crossed the Vistula in force and liberated Lodz on January 19, 1945. We, 840 Jews, the remnants of 250.000 Jews of Lodz survived. The Nazis had no time left and ran West leaving behind six mass graves in the Jewish cemetery prepared for us.

Where is the boy of the brave parents born in a cellar on November 1944, in a dying ghetto, delivered by my Mother who never doubted in his survival as he became for her a symbol of the rebirth of our nation.