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Opening Extract from...

Silesian Station

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A safer life

Miriam Rosenfeld placed the family suitcase on the overhead rack, lowered the carriage window and leaned out. Her mother's feelings were, as ever, under control, but her father was visibly close to tears.

'I'll visit as soon as I can,' she reassured him, drawing a rueful smile.

'Just take care of yourself,' he said. 'And listen to your uncle.'

'Of course I will,' she said, as the train jerked into motion. Her mother raised a hand in farewell and turned away; her father stood gazing after her, a shrinking figure beneath the station's wooden canopy. She kept looking until the station had been dwarfed by the distant mountains and the wide blue sky.

Her great-grandfather had come to this part of Silesia almost sixty years earlier, driven west by pogroms in his native Ukraine. He had been a successful carpenter in a small steppe town, and his savings had bought the farm which her parents still owned and worked. Seduced by the vista of looming mountains, his had been the first Jewish family to settle within ten miles of Wartha. Mountains, he'd told his son, offered hope of escape. The Cossacks didn't like mountains.

Miriam dried her eyes with the lace handkerchief her mother had insisted she take, and imagined her parents riding back to the farm, old Bruno hauling the cart down the long straight track between the poplars, the dust rising behind them all in the balmy air. It had been a wonderful summer so far, the crops ripening at an amazing speed.

Her father would need extra help now that she was gone, but where would

they get it? Other westward-bound Jews had been less obsessed by memories of the Cossacks, more interested in the joys of city life. The Rosenfelds were still the only Jewish family in the area, and hiring non-Jewish help was no longer allowed.

Her father's younger brother Benjamin had hated life in the countryside from an early age. He had left for Breslau when he was fifteen, but even Silesia's capital had proved insufficiently exciting, and after two years in the trenches Benjamin had settled in Berlin. During the 1920s he'd had a bewildering variety of jobs, but for the last six years he had worked in a printing factory, earning enough money to buy smart clothes and the exciting presents which distinguished his yearly visits. He had seemed less self-satisfied on his last visit, though. His own job was secure enough, he said, but many other Berlin Jews – most of them, in fact – were not so fortunate.

For those whose world barely stretched as far as Breslau, some of Uncle Benjamin's stories were hard to take in. The Rosenfelds had never married non-Jews, but they were not particularly religious, and kept the Jewish traditions that they followed very much to themselves. Miriam's father had always been well-liked by neighbouring farmers and the merchants he did business with, and it had come as something of a shock the previous year when the local government inspector, an old friend of the family, told them about new regulations which applied only to Jewish-owned farms. On a later visit he had given them a blow-by-blow account of events in Breslau during the first week of November – two synagogues burned, seven Jews killed. He wanted them to know that he was talking as a friend, but perhaps they should think about emigration.

They thanked him for his concern, but the idea seemed preposterous. A depressing letter from Benjamin detailing similar events in Berlin gave them momentary cause for concern, but no more than that. Benjamin wasn't talking about emigrating, after all. And how could they sell the farm? Where would they go?

Life on the farm went on in the usual way, up with the light, at the mercy of the seasons. But beyond its boundaries, in the village and in Wartha, it was

slowly becoming clearer that something important had changed. The younger men – boys, really – not only lacked the civility of their parents, but seemed to delight in rudeness for rudeness's sake. They were only children, Miriam's father claimed; they would surely grow up. Her mother doubted it.

Then a group of boys on their way back from a Hitler Youth meeting intercepted Miriam on her way home from the village shop. She wasn't frightened at first – she'd been at school with most of them – but the mockery soon turned to filth, their eyes grew hungry and their hands started tugging at her hair and her sleeves and her skirt. It was only the sudden appearance of one boy's father that broke the spell and sent them laughing on their way. She hadn't wanted to tell her parents, but one sleeve was torn and she'd burst into tears and her mother had dragged the story out of her. Her father had wanted to confront the boys' parents, but her mother had talked him out of it. Miriam heard them arguing late into the night, and the following day they announced that they were writing to ask Uncle Benjamin about finding her a job in Berlin. Things might be bad there, but at least she'd be with other Jews. There was always strength in numbers.

She hated the idea of leaving, but no amount of pleading would change their minds. And as the days went by she noticed, almost reluctantly, the depth of her own curiosity. She had never been further than Breslau in her seventeen years, and had only been there on the one occasion. The massive square and the beautiful town hall, the masses of people, had left her gasping with astonishment. And Berlin, of course, was much, much bigger. When Torsten had taken her to the cinema in Glatz she'd seen glimpses of the capital in a newsreel, the huge stone buildings, the fields for just walking in, the swerving automobiles and gliding trams.

Uncle Benjamin eventually replied, sounding doubtful but promising work at the printing factory. The date was set. Today's date.

Away to the south, the line of mountains was growing dimmer in the heat-haze. She took a deep gulp of the familiar air, as if it were possible to take it with her. A new life, she told herself. A safer life.

The train clattered purposefully on. The fields grew larger as the land

flattened out, lone trees and small copses stationed among them. Red-roofed villages with solitary church spires appeared at regular intervals. A black and white cat padded along between rows of cabbages.

It was really hot now, the sun pulsing down from a cloudless sky. The platform at Münsterberg seemed almost crowded, and two middle-aged women took the corridor seats in Miriam's compartment, acknowledging her greeting but ignoring her thereafter. At Strehlen the sounds of a distant marching band could be heard, and the station seemed full of uniformed young men. Several took up position in the corridor of her coach, smoking, laughing and talking at the top of their voices, as if the world deserved to hear what they were saying. Two older men – businessmen by the look of them – took the seats opposite and next to Miriam. They raised their hats to her and the other women before they sat down. The one at her side had eaten onions for lunch.

Half an hour later they were rolling into Breslau, dirt tracks giving way to metalled roads, small houses to factories. Other railway lines slid alongside, like braids intertwining on a thickening rope, until the train rattled its way into the vast shed of glass and steel which she remembered from her first visit. The onion-eater insisted on getting her suitcase down, joked that his wife's was always a great deal heavier, and tipped his hat in farewell.

Torsten's face appeared in the window, with its usual nervous smile. She hadn't seen him since he'd taken the job in Breslau but he looked much the same – unruly hair, crumpled clothes and apologetic air. The sole children of neighbouring farms, they had known each other since infancy without ever being close friends. Their two fathers had arranged for Torsten to ensure that no harm befell her between trains.

He insisted on taking her suitcase. 'Your train's in an hour,' he said. 'Platform 4, but we can go outside and get some lunch and talk.'

'I need the ladies' room,' she told him.

'Ah.' He led her down steps and along the tunnel to the glass-canopied concourse. 'Over there,' he said, pointing. 'I'll look after your suitcase.'

A woman at one of the wash-basins gave her a strange look, but said

nothing. Outside again, she noticed a nice-looking café and decided to spend some of her money on buying Torsten coffee and cake.

'No, we must go outside,' he said, looking more than usually embarrassed. It was then that she noticed the 'Jews not welcome' sign by the door. Had there been one by the ladies' room, she wondered.

They walked back down the tunnel and out into the sunshine. Several stalls by the entrance were selling snacks and drinks, and across the road, in front of a large and very impressive stone building, there was an open space with trees and seats. As Torsten bought them sandwiches and drinks she watched a couple of automobiles go by, marvelling at the expressions of ease on the drivers' faces.

'It's better outside,' she said, once they'd chosen a seat in the shade. The large stone building had *Reichsbahn Direktion* engraved in its stone façade. High above the colonnaded entrance a line of six statues stared out across the city. How had they got them up there? she wondered.

'Is it all right?' Torsten asked, meaning the sandwich.

'Lovely.' She turned towards him. 'How are you? How's your new job?'

He told her about the store he worked in, his boss, the long hours, his prospects. 'Of course, if there's a war everything will have to wait. If I survive, that is.'

'There won't be a war, will there?'

'Maybe not. My floor boss thinks there will. But that may be wishful thinking – he comes from Kattowitz, and he's hoping we can get it back from the Poles. I don't know.' He smiled at her. 'But you'll be safe in Berlin, I should think. How long will you be there for?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know.' She considered telling him about the incident with the boys, but decided she didn't want to.

'Could I write to you?' he asked.

'If you want to,' she said, somewhat surprised.

'You'll have to send me your address.'

'I'll need yours then.'

'Oh. I don't have a pencil. Just send it to the farm. They can send it on.'

'All right,' she said. He was a sweet boy, really. It was a pity he wasn't Jewish.

'It's nearly time,' he said. 'Have you got food for the journey? It's seven hours, you know.'

'Bread and cheese. I won't starve. And my father said I could get something to drink in the restaurant car.'

'I'll get you another lemonade,' he said. 'Just in case there's nothing on the train.'

They reached the platform just as the empty train pulled in. 'I'll get you a seat,' Torsten shouted over his shoulder as he joined the scrum by the end doors. She followed him aboard, and found he'd secured her a window seat in a no-smoking compartment. Other passengers already occupied the other three corner-seats. 'I'd better get off,' he said, and a sudden pang of fear assaulted her. This was it. Now she really was heading into the unknown.

He took her hand briefly in his, uncertain whether to shake or simply hold it. 'Your uncle is meeting you?' he asked, catching her moment of doubt.

'Oh yes.'

'Then you'll be fine.' He grinned. 'Maybe I'll see you in Berlin sometime.'

The thought of the two of them together in the big city made her laugh. 'Maybe,' she said.

'I'd better get off,' he said again.

'Yes. Thanks for meeting me.' She watched him disappear down the corridor, reappear on the platform. The train began to move. She stretched her neck for a last look and wave, then sat back to watch Breslau go by. The rope of tracks unwound until only theirs was left, and the buildings abruptly gave way to open fields. Farms dotted the plain, so many of them, so big a world. A few minutes later the iron lattice of a girder bridge suddenly filled the window, making her jump, and the train rumbled across the biggest river she had ever seen. A line of soldiers were trotting two-by-two along the far bank, packs on their backs.

Cinders were drifting in through the toplight, and the man opposite reached up to close it, cutting off the breeze. She felt like protesting but didn't

dare. The compartment seemed to grow more stifling by the minute, and she found her eyes were closing with tiredness – anxiety and excitement had kept her awake for most of the previous night.

She woke with a start as the train eased out of Liegnitz station, and checked the time on her father's fob watch. It was still only three o'clock. She'd tried to refuse the loan of the watch, but he had insisted that the sun and the parlour clock were all he really needed. And she could always send the watch back when she'd bought herself one of those smart new ones that people wore on their wrists.

Fields and farms still filled the windows. Two of her fellow passengers were asleep, one with his mouth wide open. He suddenly snorted himself awake, eyes opening with annoyance, then closing again.

Feeling thirsty, she reached for the bottle Torsten had bought her. She felt stiff after her sleep, and the sight of a man walking past the compartment encouraged her. She would look for the restaurant car, and buy herself a cup of tea.

A young soldier standing in the corridor told her the restaurant car was three carriages ahead. The train seemed to be going faster now, and as she walked along the swaying corridors she felt a wonderful sense of exhilaration.

The restaurant car had seats either side of a central gangway, booths for two on the right, booths for four on the left. She took the first empty two-seater and examined the menu. Tea was thirty pfennigs, which seemed expensive, but a cup of coffee was fifty.

'A cup of tea, please,' she told the young man who came to take her order.

'No cake, then?' he asked with a grin.

'No thank you,' she said, smiling back.

As he walked away she noticed a woman in one of the four-seaters staring at her. She said something to the man facing her, and he turned to stare at Miriam. The woman said something else and the man got up and walked off in the direction her waiter had taken. A minute or so later he returned with a different waiter, a much older man with a bald head and bristling moustaches. The set of his mouth suggested an unwelcome task.

He came over to Miriam's table and lowered his head to talk to her. 'Excuse me, miss,' he said, 'but I need to see your identity papers.'

'Of course,' she said. She pulled them out of her shoulder bag and handed them over.

He scanned them and sighed. 'I'm sorry, miss, but we're not allowed to serve Jewish people. A law was passed last year. I'm sorry,' he said again, his voice dropping still further. 'Normally, I wouldn't give a damn, but the gentleman back there has complained, so I have no choice.' He shrugged. 'So there it is.'

'It's all right,' she said, getting up. 'I understand,' she added, as if it was him that needed reassurance.

'Thank you,' he said.

As he turned away, the woman's face came into view, a picture of grim satisfaction. Why? Miriam wanted to ask. What possible difference could it make to you?

Another passenger looked up as she left the car, an older woman with neatly braided grey hair. Was that helplessness in her eyes?

Miriam walked back down the train, grasping the corridor rail for balance. Was this what life in Berlin would be like? She couldn't believe it – Uncle Benjamin would have moved somewhere else. In Berlin Jews would live with other Jews, have their own world, their own places to drink tea.

Back in her seat, the glances of her fellow-passengers seemed almost sinister. She took a sip from her bottle, conscious that now she would have to ration her consumption. Torsten had known, she thought, or at least guessed. Why hadn't he warned her? Embarrassment or shame, she wondered. She hoped it was shame.

She resumed her watch at the window. Silesian fields, meandering rivers, village stations that the train ignored. It stopped at a large town – Sagan, according to the station sign. She had never heard of it, nor of Guben an hour later. Frankfurt, which she remembered from a school geography lesson, was the first thing that day to be smaller than expected.

The last hour seemed quicker, as if the train was eager to get home. By the

time the first outskirts of Berlin appeared, the sun was sinking towards the horizon, flashing between silhouetted buildings and chimneys, reflecting off sudden stretches of river. Roads and railways ran in all directions.

Her train ran under a bridge as another train thundered over it, and began to lose speed. A wide street lay below her window, lined with elegant houses, full of automobiles. Moments later a soot-stained glass roof loomed to swallow the train, which smoothly slowed to a halt on one of the central platforms. '*Schlesischer Bahnhof!*' a voice shouted. Silesian Station.

She pulled down her suitcase, queued in the corridor to leave the coach, and finally stepped down onto the platform. The glass roof was higher, grander, than the one at Breslau, and for several moments she just stood there, looking up, marvelling at the sheer size of it all, as passengers brushed by her en route to the exit stairs. She waited while the crowd eased, watching a strange locomotive-less train leave from another platform, and then started down. A large concourse came into view, milling with people, surrounded with all sorts of stalls and shops and offices. She stopped at the bottom, uncertain what to do. Where was Uncle Benjamin?

A man was looking at her, a questioning expression on his face. He was wearing a uniform, but not, she thought, a military one. He seemed too old to be a soldier.

He came towards her, smiling and raising his peaked cap. 'I'm here to collect you,' he said.

'My uncle sent you?' she asked.

'That's right.'

'Is he all right?'

'He's fine. Nothing to worry about. Some urgent business came up, that's all.' He reached out a hand for her suitcase. 'The car's outside.'